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ABSTRACT

By providing illustrative examples from real classrooms and feedback from teachers, this teacher handbook brings to life ways teachers have modified their adult literacy classroom practice to be more learner contextualized. It provides guidance in moving toward contextualized literacy instruction; teachers must adapt suggestions to most suitably meet their classes' needs. Chapter 1 provides a background of existing theory on contextualized instruction. Chapter 2 addresses getting to know students and their contexts outside of school. Guidelines are provided for beginning and building relationships with students and initiating discussions and activities that help determine literacy practices most relevant to the learners. Chapter 3 provides a generalized guide to help teachers create their own materials and activities that meet skill needs of students within a relevant context. Chapter 4 provides more examples of the kind of materials and activities that can be termed authentic. It describes two themed activities (Household Tasks, Parenting and Family) that can organize classes for weeks at a time and presents possible followup activities for each theme. Chapter 5 addresses assessment, including what it is for; what tools are best for assessing students and programs; how contextualized instruction fits with standardized assessment; and whether curriculum can be contextualized when one or more assessment measures are not. Appendixes include 42 references; 2 class portraits; and list of 45 print and web resources. (YLB)

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# *Creating* Authentic Materials *and* Activities *for the* Adult Literacy Classroom

## A HANDBOOK FOR PRACTITIONERS

**Erik Jacobson**
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**Victoria Purcell-Gates**

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# *Contents*

**Introduction** *v*

**1 Using and Learning Literacy in Context** *1*
- *Defining Authentic 1*
- *Assessing Authenticity 4*
- *Identifying the Purposes for Reading and Writing 5*
- *Frame One: Functions of Language 5*
- *Frame Two: Literacy Practices 8*
- *Life Changes Yield Literacy Change 13*
- *Learning Literacy in Context 13*
- *Frame Three: Functional Context Education 13*
- *Frame Four: Situated Cognition and Constructivism 16*

**2 Getting to Know Students** *27*
- *Getting to Know Students Through the Intake Process 30*
- *Getting to Know Students During Class 33*
- *Sharing Personal Histories 37*

**3 Using Authentic Materials and Activities in the Classroom** *43*
- *Identifying Important Text Types 44*
- *Types and Uses of Texts Used by Teachers and Students in the LPALS 45*
- *Issues Related to Type of Text 53*
- *Thinking About Purpose 56*
- *Class Planning Issues 58*

**4 Authentic Thematic Activities for the Classroom** *67*
*Sample Themes for Adult Literacy Instruction* *69*
*Theme One: Household Tasks* *70*
*Possible Extensions of the Cooking Activity* *74*
*Further Suggestions for Household Related Projects* *75*
*What Makes these Activities Authentic?* *76*
*Theme Two: Parenting and Family* *78*
*Further Suggestions for Thematically Related Projects* *84*
*What Makes these Activities Authentic?* *86*

**5 Assessment** *89*
*Getting Started with Learner-Contextualized Assessment* *90*
*Assessment of Progress* *92*
*Other Forms of Learner-Contextualized Assessment* *95*
*Standardized Assessments* *97*

**6 Concluding Thoughts** *105*

**References** *107*

**Appendix One: Two Class Portraits** *113*
*Class Portrait One* *113*
*Class Portrait Two* *116*

**Resources** *119*
*Student Writings* *119*
*Curriculum Guides and Teaching Resources* *120*
*Webliography* *124*

# Introduction

This handbook is the result of a five-year study of adult literacy education in the United States entitled "The Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study," which we will refer to by its acronym, LPALS. It is one of many research projects conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), a joint effort of World Education, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Portland State University, Rutgers University, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee. The LPALS focused on one of NCSALL's research priorities: the nature and impact of classroom practice in adult basic education. This introduction describes our research, presents key findings, and provides an overview of the goals and structure of this handbook.

## ◆ BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

When we began our work, we believed that adult literacy education should help students master new types of texts, engage in new literacy practices (uses of reading and writing), and increase the frequency with which they engage in pre-existing practices. Unlike many in the field, we also believe that individual and programmatic success should be measured by how much students use what they learn in literacy education in their lives outside of school rather than relying upon standardized tests. We feel that teachers benefit by asking questions such as: *Are my students reading new kinds of materials? Are they reading more often? Are they writing in new ways?* In short, we believe that students' growth in literacy can be best seen in their use of literacy outside of the class itself.

This measure of success — positive change in the types or frequencies of literacy practices engaged in outside of school — has repercussions that extend beyond the adult student's own learning and into that of the student's family. Research on young children's literacy development has shown that a relationship exists between the type and frequency of literacy activities that children are exposed to within the home and family environment and their later abilities to learn to read and write in school (Beals, DeTemple & Dickinson, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Snow, 1993; Taylor, 1983). A literacy class that facilitates increases in reading and writing in the home not only benefits adult students but also the children of adult students, many of whom exhibit problems learning to read and write in school.

Our research into classroom practice focused on two different aspects of adult literacy instruction. The first was the nature of classroom activities and materials, and the second was the degree to which classes were collaborations between teachers and students. We chose these because, while very little empirical research exists on the outcomes of different types of adult literacy instruction (Wagner & Venezky, 1995), the prevailing belief among academics and adult literacy program and policy leaders is that instruction which (a) uses authentic, or real life, literacy activities and materials (Auerbach, 1992; Fingeret, 1991; Lytle, 1994; Stein, 2000) and (b) is collaborative, dialogic, and responsive to the lives of learners (Auerbach, 1992; Freire, 1993; Horton in Glen, 1996; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000) is best for adult learners.

Adult educators who assert that it is important to use activities and materials that are drawn from the learners' lives outside of school, which we will refer to as *authentic*, or *learner contextualized*, believe that using *real life texts* for *real life purposes* provides students with an education that is meaningful and responds better to their individual needs. Educators who take this approach believe that authentic texts do not have to be kept aside until students reach a certain level of proficiency. Authentic texts should not be limited to more advanced students, as they can play a vital role in the education of students with less literacy experience. This view contrasts with the reality of many classrooms, where teachers rely almost entirely on textbooks and workbook series. These texts often have no material that is relevant to the students' lives outside of school, so we will refer to them as school-only, or decontextualized.

## ◆ RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Ample anecdotal evidence lent credence to a belief in the value of using authentic materials. No large-scale study had ever been done, however, to provide empirical evidence about the possible benefits of classes that use authentic materials and activities, rather than materials and activities designed to be used only in school. Our first research question, therefore, was: *Does instruction that relies upon authentic materials and activities make a difference in how much students are able to transfer reading and writing skills and strategies from their classrooms to their out-of-school lives?*

The second aspect of classroom instruction that interested us was the degree to which students and teachers collaborate in the classroom. We believe, as do many others in the field, that it is important for teachers to work together with students, and that students must be equal partners in their own education. This means that students help make decisions about class content and activities, that students are involved in providing programs with some direction, and that students have a voice in how their work is assessed. As with the use of authentic materials and activities, no large-scale studies provided evidence that this approach has a positive impact on students' use of literacy outside of school. Our second research question was: *Does collaborative classroom instruction make a difference in how much students are able to transfer reading and writing skills and strategies from their classrooms to their out-of-school lives?*

Authentic and collaborative practices are often associated with *critical* or *liberatory adult pedagogy*. They are central aspects of the pedagogy of

Paulo Freire and others like him who attempt to connect issues of social justice and social change to the adult education classroom. Educators in this tradition see education itself as highly political in nature. While all the researchers involved in the study believe, in varying degrees, in such an approach, the *critical* or *liberatory* aspects of classroom practice were not the focus of the study. We suggest that it is possible to use authentic materials and to engage in classroom practices that are collaborative without framing one's work as liberatory or critical. Those interested in learning more about critical pedagogy should refer to the suggested readings in the appendix.

## ◆ METHODOLOGY

To capture the impact of authentic and collaborative practice on students' lives outside of school, we collected and analyzed data from both inside and outside of school. We began by gathering data about our student participants' classes. For each class, we collected teacher input via questionnaires, student input from interviews, and also arranged for an observation of the class by a researcher. Research assistants visited students in their homes to administer extensive questionnaires about past and present literacy practices and about change in types or frequencies of those literacy practices. Questionnaires were completed in the students' homes so students could actually show the data collector examples of what they were reading and writing. Holding the interviews away from the students' program sites also, we believe, removed some of the pressure students might feel to make their teacher or program look good.

Due to the level of detail (50 items), each questionnaire took about an hour and a half to complete. Students who participated completed a questionnaire every three months, for up to a year. We also conducted additional open-ended interviews with 14 of the students as a follow-up to the questionnaires.

We chose a broad range of adult education settings, including adult basic education (ABE), pre-GED, family literacy programs, and programs for students who were learning English (ESOL). We included both whole class and tutor-learner formats. We targeted students who were working on basic reading and writing skills within these programs. We did not work with ESOL classes that consisted of students who were already literate in their native language and who were focusing on their oral English skills. We were interested in students who were developing new literacy skills, not students who were switching the language in which they used literacy. By the end of the study, a total of 173 students had participated, from 83 adult literacy classes in 22 states.

## ◆ RESULTS

Our analysis of the data confirmed our first hypothesis: Students who participate in classes that include authentic, or learner-contextualized, materials and activities are more likely to say they had started new literacy practices or had increased the amount of time spent engaging in literacy activities outside of school. This was true even when we controlled for (or accounted for) students' literacy levels and the amount of time they had been attending class.

Looking closely at the questionnaire and interview data, many of the students in the LPALS reported that they began, increased the frequency of, or stopped specific reading and writing practices when their lives changed in some way. These life changes brought with them different types of texts, different purposes and requirements for reading and writing, and different inclinations to read and write. New mothers began writing to family members for the first time. Immigrants found new types of texts available for reading in their new country. When children began school, parents began receiving letters and directions from school authorities, many of which required written responses. New jobs meant having to learn how to read and write different types of materials, including, for example, bus or train schedules. Moving away from home meant reading and paying bills for the first time. Literacy practices (actual reading and writing in life) are always interwoven with peoples' lives and the ways in which they are lived. Classes that were sensitive to the changing nature of students' lives outside school were seen as doing a better job supporting students in their learning of new uses for reading and writing. With these findings, we are able for the first time to give weight to the beliefs of many adult educators: Bringing the lives, needs, and interests of the students into the classroom is an integral part of best practice.

The analysis did not find a similar relationship between classes that were characterized as collaborative and changes in at-home uses of literacy. This is not to say that such a relationship does not exist: perhaps the methodology of our study was unable to document it. We hope that other researchers will look at this issue in the future. It may be that a questionnaire format cannot capture what is important about the collaborative process, and that what is needed is a more ethnographic study of this issue.

## ◆ THIS TEACHER HANDBOOK

We see this book as a starting place for adult education teachers interested in changing their instructional practice, particularly as it relates to their learners' lives. This book will also be helpful to program administrators who are interested in leading change their programs or who wish to know more about contextualized instruction in order to support teachers who are trying to implement it. Readers will benefit most from this book if they are willing to be reflective about their own practice and explore new ways in which to structure curricula. Each of the chapters has a few discussion questions, and some exercises to be completed. We suggest taking enough time to think about the questions, possibly by keeping a reading journal. It may also be helpful to read this together with colleagues as part of a study group.

While many excellent resources for adult educators encourage the use of authentic materials and activities in classrooms and provide detailed examples of how to create or modify activities to better reflect the lives of learners, this book is fundamentally different. It is based on the results of a nationwide study of adult education programs and the literacy practices of students enrolled in them. We draw on what teachers and students had to say about the 83 classrooms that were involved in our study, and from comments made outside the classroom by the 173 students who participated. We also conducted follow up interviews and class observations with seven teachers whose classrooms were recognized for their use of authentic materials and activities. We provide both concrete descriptions of what works and information and insight into how specific teachers make it work. By providing illustrative examples from real classrooms as well as feedback from the teachers in those classrooms, we bring to life the processes that teachers have gone through to modify their classroom practice to be more learner-contextualized. We share the steps these teachers went through to create contextualized learning environments for their students, what has worked especially well for them, and what has not worked as well or at all. We share the struggles as well as the successes. By doing this, we attempt to troubleshoot the potential barriers others may face in modifying or changing their practice.

## Not a Recipe Book

This book provides guidance in moving toward contextualized literacy instruction, but it is not a recipe book. Each classroom is different: we can only give examples of contextualized classroom practice and provide suggestions. Teachers must adapt the suggestions found in this book to most suitably meet the needs of their own classes. We do not provide reproducible lesson plans or worksheets. This book asks teachers to think about their own practice and to consider what might work best for them.

This book is appropriate for practitioners in adult basic education (ABE), adult literacy, family literacy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). We recognize that issues with ESOL students are unique within adult education, so we attempt, throughout the book, to provide examples that address these specific needs

## What to Expect From the Rest of the Book

In Chapter One, we provide a background of existing theory on contextualized instruction. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical understanding of the practices we are promoting in this book.

Chapter Two addresses getting to know students and their contexts outside of school. In this chapter, teachers from the LPALS who exemplify the approach we are promoting share the processes they use to get to know their students. Based on their experiences, we provide guidelines for beginning relationships with students, building those relationships, and initiating discussions and activities that help determine the literacy practices that are most relevant to the learners.

Chapter Three is designed to enable teachers to begin to create materials and activities that are relevant to their students. We provide a generalized guide to help readers create their own materials and activities. We also talk specifically about creating materials that meet the skill needs of students within a relevant context.

While we provide information and ideas about authentic classroom reading and writing practices, we do not consider this book to be an exhaustive source of information. For example, while we suggest using journal writing in the classroom, we do not, however, provide a comprehensive description of how to use journals. Entire books have been written about such instructional practices, and we strongly suggest looking to other resources to expand on the ideas contained in this book.

Chapter Four provides more examples of the kind of materials and activities that can be termed authentic. This is done by describing two themed activities that can organize classes for weeks at a time. We also present possible follow up activities for each theme.

In Chapter Five, we address the issue of assessment, with the aim of helping teachers answer the following questions: What is assessment for? What tools are best for assessing students and for assessing programs? How does contextualized instruction fit with standardized assessment? Can curriculum be contextualized when one or more assessment measures are not?

We conclude in Chapter Six and provide additional information in the appendices. They include a suggested reading list on related topics, and a webliography with the names and URLs for relevant web sites.

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Using and Learning Literacy in Context*

> *"I know highway signs, I know the regular road signs. I know what it means. I know bridge signs that say how many feet you've got to go under it. I didn't know that before."*
>
> —Student participant in the LPALS

The LPALS looked at possible relationships between the use of authentic materials and activities in the classroom and changes in students' at-home literacy practices. Support for the use of authentic materials can be found in social and cultural theory about literacy, in developmental theories and research, and in pedagogical theory and practice. As a research team, we drew on these resources to understand what constitutes *authentic* materials and activities and what the importance of those materials and activities might be. In this chapter, we address each of these strands of thought. First, however, we explain what we mean when we use the word *authentic*.

*Discussion Questions*

**How would you define *authentic* materials?**

◆

**Do you use authentic materials in your class now? If so, what do you use?**

### ◆ DEFINING AUTHENTIC

What do we mean by authentic, or learner-contextualized, materials and activities? We mean print materials used in ways that they would be used in the lives of learners outside of their adult education classes. For example, if students are very concerned about a city decision to build a waste treatment facility in their neighborhood, their teacher might decide to

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bring in various newspaper articles and editorials about this decision so that students can learn the facts and discuss and debate the issues. She may encourage them to write letters, voicing their concerns and opposition, to city officials. Students who are parents may wish to become more adept at reading communication from their children's schools, so authentic materials for those students could include school flyers and letters from their children's teachers. Authentic writing activities might include writing notes to teachers. By creating materials and activities that reflect students' backgrounds, interests, and experiences, teachers are attempting to contextualize their instruction within the students' lives and provide literacy instruction using the very materials their students will engage with as they live those lives.

We also use the term *school-only*, or *decontextualized*, for activities and materials that are not found outside of classroom settings, and that are, for the most part, created solely for the purpose of teaching and learning reading and writing skills. These materials and the purposes for reading and writing them do not necessarily reflect the different experiences and interests that students bring to class, aside from the interest in learning to read and write, nor do they take into account the uses people make of these texts as they go about their lives outside of a school environment. An example of this is cloze exercises, which are very popular in some classrooms.

**Example of a *Cloze Exercise***

1. We go to buy food at the ____________.
2. All of the __________ got good grades on their tests.
3. When the weather is ______ you need to wear a jacket.

While one can argue for the pedagogical benefits of a cloze exercise (e.g., simulating using context clues for word recognition), outside of a classroom situation people do not read lists of unconnected sentences to try and fill in what is missing. Indeed, it is very hard to imagine ever having to complete a cloze exercise, or anything that resembles a cloze exercise, outside the context of schooling.

It is not simply the format of a text that makes it authentic, but how the materials are used. For example, consider the use of newspapers in the adult literacy classroom. If a teacher brings in copies of a newspaper article from a year ago, about a subject that the students don't care about, only to teach specific skills such as summarizing or finding the main idea, the newspaper is not being used in an outside-of-the-classroom fashion. People simply do not read the newspaper with those purposes in mind. So, while text type is an important consideration when assessing materials, just as important is how those materials are used. The following examples demonstrate that real life materials can be used in either authentic or school-only ways.

### Writing Letters

Many adults need to write letters at one time or another in their lives. Letter writing can be an authentic activity for adult literacy classrooms if students have real purposes for writing and if letters that are written in class are actually sent. However, practicing writing letters that will never get sent to people who don't really exist is a decontextualized, school-only activity that serves no purpose in the out-of-school lives of the learners.

### Reading Novels

Reading novels in class can promote an appreciation for literature and can be a great way to encourage students to relate their own lives and experiences to those of the characters in a book. To make novel reading and discussions an authentic, rather than a school-only, experience, teachers need to find books that reflect the interests and experiences of their students and make literature appreciation and discussion the main goals. A teacher who selects books for her class based on their readability level and their controlled vocabulary and then devotes most of the reading time to discrete skills such as decoding or vocabulary development is using novels as a school-only activity. Teaching skills through novels is perfectly appropriate, but if it is the only point of reading then it does not reflect the actual purposes for which people read literature outside of school, and, therefore, would not be considered an authentic literacy event, according to our definition.

### Writing Checks

Writing checks is often perceived as a necessary skill for all adults, so check writing is a skill that is taught frequently in adult literacy classes. This is an authentic activity if a teacher learns that her students are interested in opening checking accounts or want to learn how to use an already existing account. Consider, however, how meaningless this activity is for students who do not have checking accounts and have no plans for opening them. For such students, learning check writing in class would be decontextualized from their lives.

## ◆ ASSESSING AUTHENTICITY

Any assessment of authenticity must include both the text type and the way that it is used in the world. Texts that do not mediate people' social lives were not considered "authentic" by us in the LPALS. For this reason, two factors must be considered to render a judgment about the authenticity of a literacy activity within an adult literacy class: (1) text, and (2) purpose for reading and writing that text. The degree to which the text is one that is used by people outside of school and the degree to which the purpose for reading and writing that text is the same as it would be outside of school determines the degree to which we would consider the literacy activity authentic.

### ◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: Texts and Purposes

| *Text* | *School based use* | *Authentic use* | *Have you used this text? How?* |
|---|---|---|---|
| TV schedule | looking for proper nouns as a capitalization review | look for a favorite show | |
| Health brochure | words for spelling test | get information about a specific condition | |
| Novel | review punctuation | enjoy the style of the writer | |

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Discussion Questions

**Are there materials that you consider authentic that we might not?**

The meaning and implications of the word authentic is often a topic of debate, particularly when it is used to indicate out-of-school literacy practices. To begin with, nobody would want to be labeled as inauthentic. Some people believe that textbooks and workbooks are authentic because they are part of the reality of schooling. Indeed, research has shown that students have to learn to *do school*, and that school is a context with its own purposes, text types, and discourse; students who have not learned to do school in the ways that are expected often find themselves at a disadvantage. We are not interested, however, in how adults are learning to do school, but in how school may be helping adult literacy students to do literacy outside of school. Therefore, we consider as authentic those literacy events that researchers (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Teale, 1986) have documented as mediating people's social and cultural lives outside of a schooling context.

### ◆ IDENTIFYING THE PURPOSES FOR READING AND WRITING

In thinking about the purposes for reading and writing, we looked at language use through two different frames. The first frame was linguistic in nature, and was based on the linguist Halliday's work on the functions of language. The second frame was more anthropological in nature, and focused on the meanings individuals and cultures have for their own uses of literacy. We present each of these frames in turn.

Discussion Questions

**When thinking about students' purposes for reading and writing, do you draw on any theory or research to organize your thinking? If yes, what?**

### ◆ FRAME ONE: FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

Halliday (1978) identified seven functions of language. He attempts, with his typology, to capture all the social purposes that language use serves. Reading and writing inside and outside of the classroom are examples of language use that can be analyzed according to this

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**Discussion Questions**

**How well does Halliday's typology capture the functions of language?**

typology. As a research team, we were interested in how well the function for using a text inside the classroom matched the function for using that text in the world outside of the classroom. While any given text can be used in a wide variety of ways, we were concerned with being able to identify what the use, beyond the goal of learning to read or to write, was for a lesson or activity. Each of the seven functions Halliday identified is described in the chart on page 7, along with examples of literacy events that serve or enact that function.

**◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: Look at the list on page 7. What possible functions could the following texts serve outside of learning to read and write?**

**TEXTS** **FUNCTIONS**

1. a business card ____________________
2. a shopping list ____________________
3. a written down phone message ____________________
4. graffiti ____________________
5. a street name plate ____________________
6. a warranty ____________________
7. a lease ____________________
8. a movie poster ____________________
9. a tattoo ____________________
10. a speeding ticket ____________________

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## ◆ CHART: Functions of Language (Halliday, 1978)

**1. Instrumental:** Language used to satisfy a material need, enabling one to obtain goods and services that one wants or needs.

- ◆ *Ordering something via a form*
- ◆ *Requesting service in a memo*

**2. Regulatory:** Language used to control behavior. This is related to the instrumental function, but is distinct. The difference between this and the instrumental is that in the instrumental the focus is on the goods or services required and it does not matter who provides them, whereas the regulatory function is directed towards a particular individual and it is the behavior of that individual that is to be influenced.

- ◆ *Written rules and regulations (e.g., driver's manual)*
- ◆ *The 'don't walk' sign or a stop sign*

**3. Interactional:** Language used to make or maintain interpersonal contact

- ◆ *Personal letters, greeting cards, notes like, "I love you," etc.*

**4. Personal:** Language used to express awareness of oneself, in contradistinction to one's environment. Includes expressions of personal feelings, of participation and withdrawal, of interest, pleasure, disgust, etc.

- ◆ *Memo of personal reaction to a new policy*
- ◆ *Writing in a journal of personal reactions and feelings, etc.*

**5. Heuristic:** Language used to learn and to explore the environment.

- ◆ *To read for information*
- ◆ *To write down questions to ask of text or of a speaker, etc.*

**6. Imaginative:** Language used to create, including stories and make-believe/pretend.

- ◆ *Reading/writing poetry, fiction*

**7. Informative:** Language used to communicate information to someone who does not already possess that information.

- ◆ *Writing information texts*
- ◆ *Writing research reports*
- ◆ *Writing personal letters to inform someone of what has happened to a relative, etc.*

## ◆ FRAME TWO: LITERACY PRACTICES

> *"You know how they send you those forms out every month or six months, I didn't fill them out – my sister or my daughter would help me fill them out."*
>
> —Student participant in the LPALS

> *"I get Chilton books out to repair my own vehicle...If I don't know how to do it I'll take a book out and read about it, and like I took the book out how to do rear shocks, how to do mufflers and brakes, and stuff, you know"*
>
> —Student participant in the LPALS

In the last few decades, literacy researchers have left the classroom and ventured out to study the reading and writing activities of people in their daily lives. Shifting the focus from literacy in school to literacy outside of school has provided a new perspective on literacy, and an opportunity to question assumptions about the nature of reading and writing. For example, in Delgado-Gaitan's (1987) study of a Mexican immigrant community in the United States, participants reported that they did not use text very much. However, the researcher found that they actually read a number of things in English and Spanish on a daily basis. What was the basis for this discrepancy? Why didn't the participants view their own activity from the same perspective as the researcher did? How can one read a text but not be *reading*?

*Discussion Questions*

**How do you define literacy?**

◆

**What is a reader?**

◆

**What kinds of reading do you value? Why?**

◆

**Do your students value the same kinds of reading?**

Delgado-Gaitan believes that "they did not identify their activities as reading because they did not perceive themselves as readers" (p. 23). They saw reading as an academic, or school-based activity. So, in this case, the definition of "a reader" is not so straight forward, since it is not simply "someone who reads." Indeed, it seems to involve issues beyond the decoding of text, since other people who read and write the same texts as the participants in Delgado-Gaitan's would consider themselves readers. The meaning of a literacy event (the reading or writing of a text) is not inherent in the text itself, but depends upon the intentions and understandings of the individuals involved. Instead of assuming all people read and write in the same ways, many teachers and researchers working in different communities are now trying to understand what sense individuals and communities make of their own reading and writing practices. What constitutes reading and who might be considered a reader varies from context to context. There is no single definition of what literacy is.

A focus on the relationship between social context and variations in the practice of literacy has become a key theme of what has been called the "New Literacy Studies." Many researchers and theorists associated with this approach would agree that "All uses of written language can be seen as located in particular times and places. Equally, all literate activity is indicative of broader social practices." (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000, p. 1). For example, the increasing use of e-mail as a means to communicate is a result of a widening access to computer technology and the heightened pace of daily life in an information-driven economy. The use of e-mail is thus related to "broader social practices." Not all e-mail is the same: one does not necessarily write the same sort of e-mail at home and at work. Style, syntax, and content are affected by time and location.

Not everyone uses e-mail, since access is not universal. Looking at literacy from a sociocultural perspective also means looking at social factors that influence individual's perceptions and choices. To understand why the participants in Delgado-Gaitan's study did not self-identify as readers, one could first look at their status as immigrants or at their educational status. Their perceptions about what a reader is (i.e., "someone who is educated") or about what texts are valued enough to matter (e.g., "academic books") might reveal their understanding of their place in the power structure.

Researchers have also examined sociocultural variables such as gender. Why is it that girls and boys tend to read different types of texts? What does this say about the impact of gender socialization on uses of literacy? Variations in writing styles have also been found to be associated with ethnic identity. Ball (1992) found preferences for certain types of rhetorical structures in the work of African American students. Other researchers have suggested that African-American youth might reject literacy practices that are associated with academic success since they pose a threat to their African-American identity (Ogbu, 1991). Researchers have also found variations in literacy activity that appear to correlate with social class (Miner, 1993; Cruz, 1994; Leslie, 1995). Variations exist in the ways people think about the place and value of literacy and therefore of their own literacy as well.

While categories such as gender, race, or class are somewhat large and abstract constructs, literacy research informed by sociocultural concerns can also examine the specific contexts in which individuals become literate. To avoid making generalizations, researchers have also studied how race or class is enacted, recreated, or resisted in specific cases. Some researchers now focus on what are termed "local literacies" (Street, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998), the reading and writing practices that are found in a given area. Gee (1994) suggests that "different societies and social subgroupings have different types of literacy, and literacy has different social and mental effects in different social and cultural contexts" (p. 168). Definitions and assessments of literacy cannot be taken out of the context of real people reading and writing.

Teachers can learn a lot by trying to see what role literacy plays in the social reality of a student. What does literacy mean to an African-American student? What does it means to a recent immigrant? This does not mean that all African-American or immigrants use literacy in the same way. While there may be some aspects of reading that are correlated with gender, all women do not read the same way. Students cannot be pigeonholed by some demographic information. Because a single individual may belong to multiple societies and subgroupings, their literacy cannot be seen as unidimensional. There is also individual variation, of course. However, cultural values and practices do have an impact on the use of literacy, and teachers must strive to account for those cultural variations.

One way to avoid making generalizations about the way individuals in certain categories read is to look at texts in situ. Since literacy involves "the reading and writing of specific texts for socially situated purposes and intents" (Barton & Hamilton, p. 3), one value of using local literacies as a framework is that it allows researchers to examine what types of texts are found in a given setting (e.g., animal auction forms) and what purpose or intent these text serve (e.g., purchasing new livestock). Looking at local literacies highlights the use people make of text in their day-to-day lives. Since these uses vary due to social goals and cultural practices of individuals within a setting, implied in this work is an interest in *literacy culture*. This term can be used to reflect all the ways in which people in social groups of various sizes (such as families or communities) engage in literacy practices. For example, Heath's (1983) influential study described the different "ways with words" of three communities, and suggested that educational crises might occur when a community has a way with words that differs from what is expected in mainstream schools. Rather than simply being about decoding or writing, "school literacy instruction is taken to be a set of literacy practices" (Reder, 1994, p. 49) that not all communities share.

When thinking about what purposes an individual may have for using literacy, it is important not to have too narrow a definition of what literacy is. The student quoted at the beginning of the section, who uses books to help him repair cars, struggled in school and would not score well on most standardized tests of reading. He can and does, however, read the text relevant to his purpose of repairing his car, an activity in which he wants, or needs, to engage. Thus, literacy mediates his life activities as it does all readers and writers. He reads and (we assume) writes texts that serve to accomplish specific purposes that are relevant to him in his contexts and given times. The other student quoted at the beginning of the section remarked that she did not fill out forms, even though she was able to read and write other texts. She was looking for the class to help her add this type of writing to her repertoire of literacy skills.

When we interviewed students about their literacy practices, we asked them about 50 separate literacy practices in order to attempt to capture the complexity of literacy as it is used in people's everyday lives outside of school. What we mean here by *literacy practice* is the reading and writing of specific texts for socially-situated purposes and intents. This differs from Barton and Hamilton (1998), who define literacy practices as

> ...the general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However, practices are not observable units of behaviour since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships....This includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy. These are processes internal to the individual; at the same time, practices are the social processes which connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities (pp. 6-7).

Barton and Hamilton state that while literacy practices are unobservable, the associated literacy events and texts are observable units. Literacy events, for Barton and Hamilton, are activities where literacy has a role and include both texts and talk around those texts. While finding no fault with this definition of literacy practices and literacy events, we have chosen to focus on the central part of these: texts and the reading and writing of these texts.

On pages 21 to 27 is a simplification of the questionnaire that we used with students in the study. Rather than asking students about their skill level (e.g., high, intermediate, low), we wanted to know exactly what they did with literacy. We invite readers to complete the questionnaire for themselves (about out of school use of literacy) and for their classes (what activities students participated in, in class). Those without children, or classes without parent/child time such as family literacy programs often have, should skip the parts of the questionnaire that are not applicable.

### *Discussion Questions*

**Are there certain texts that you do not use at all? Are there types of text that you use all the time?**

◆

**How wide a variety of literacy activities do your students currently engage in inside the classroom?**

◆

**Which activities do you think your students engage in outside of the classroom?**

◆

**Which one of those activities do you think would be important to bring into the classroom? Why?**

## ◆ LIFE CHANGES YIELD LITERACY CHANGE

We also asked the students when it was they began to engage in the specific practices. For example, "When did you read menus for the first time?" Their answers typically noted times when their lives were going through some sort of change. These practices were often added when a child was born, when there was a change in employment, or when there were changes in marital status. These changes created the need to do things they had never done before, such as read menus or fill out applications. Rather than a general need for literacy, or the desire to move to the next "level" of literacy, these students mentioned very specific things that they felt like they needed to learn. This focus on literacy practices might be important when assessing the result of adult basic education. While Beder (1999) found no evidence for an impact of adult basic education as measured by tests, Sheehan-Holt and Smith (2000) found a relationship between basic skills education programs and reading practices: what literacy is used for in the world outside of school.

## ◆ LEARNING LITERACY IN CONTEXT

Just as we use two frames (functions of language and literacy practices) to support our belief in the importance of text type and purpose in assessing authentic literacy materials, we rely upon two additional, related frames to support the use of contextually situated education. Frame three is called functional context education, and frame four is a combination of situated cognition and constructivism.

## ◆ FRAME THREE: FUNCTIONAL CONTEXT EDUCATION

The belief that it is best for adult students to receive instruction which utilizes authentic, or real life, materials and activities is founded upon the sociocultural view of literacy, particularly in the influence of context on literacy practice. Research has found that students learn most effectively when instructional materials reflect and incorporate students' prior experiences (Fingeret, 1991). Classroom activities using generative themes taken from the lives of adult learners facilitate their acquisition of literacy

(Freire, 1993; Glen, 1996; Purcell Gates & Waterman, 2000). For this reason, we use the term learner-contextualized. With this term, we hope to capture first, that materials need to be grounded in the context of the learner's life outside of class; and second, that this can only be done by the student themselves. This second meaning of learner-contextualized, which refers to the process, is key to understanding the limits of a teacher's ability to judge how life-contextualized a material or activity may be.

Even in the midst of the "reading wars" (a long-running battle about literacy teaching methodologies), the importance of context is something upon which experts have agreed. Some calls for a structured, phonics-based approach to reading also stress that students should work with words they see immediate value in knowing (Curtis, 1997), or with texts in which they have individual interest (Fink, 1998). Students' active participation in the creation of materials has been associated with higher levels of student achievement (Hunter & Harman, 1985). Other researchers have documented that student writing based on their own lives has been associated with increases in writing skills (Stasz, Schwartz & Weeden, 1994; D'Annunzio, 1994).

Thus, a growing body of research points to the importance of incorporating the student's life context into classroom activities and materials. This is sometimes referred to as "functional context education," which integrates objects of study into "the functional contexts that engage people in the world outside the classroom, including the world of work" (Reder, 1994, p. 47). Barton and Hamilton refer to this as "the reading and writing of specific texts for socially situated purposes and intents." We often call this activity, "Students using *real-life* texts for *real-life* purposes."

What is contextualized and "real-life" is a matter of some debate. What would at first appear to be a routine part of life for some may not have any part in others. For example, filling out a passport application may be a "natural" part of life for many people, but for a student who has no plans or means to travel abroad, filling out such a form in class would be strictly an academic exercise. Indeed, some researchers warn:

> In contextual learning approaches, then, whose context characterizes the learning experience matters a great deal. In many instances, selection of

> the particular context is not driven primarily by student interests or even necessarily by the teacher. Rather, those contexts are often determined by appeal to abstract ideas or issues, largely external to learners, such as the need for a skilled, productive workforce, reform of welfare, and reducing inter-generational illiteracy through family literacy programs. The workplace or the family become "contexts" for learning not because they are necessarily meaningful to the learner but because they are judged by other to be more important locations for learners to demonstrate certain levels of competence or skills (Dirx, Amey & Haston, 1999, p. 4).

Discussions about contextualized education cannot be divorced from ethical or philosophical questions about the role of teachers and the position of students. In addition, questions about addressing students' contexts are connected to beliefs about what role education can and should play in the world. Should education be connected to students' contexts simply to help them learn a selected collection of skills and information, or should education be about helping students to change their (and our) contexts?

### ◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: What literacy practices would you associate with these contexts?

| | TEXT | PURPOSE |
|---|---|---|
| 1. workplace | | |
| 2. family | | |
| 3. the United States | | |
| 4. your city or town | | |
| 5. public transportation | | |

**How relevant are these contexts to your students? How do you know?**

## ◆ FRAME FOUR: SITUATED COGNITION AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Researchers and theoreticians who look at cognitive development have also addressed the importance of social setting and context. Like literacy, many researchers now see cognition as socially situated rather than abstract and decontextualized. Two related strands of thought provided theoretical support for our research: ideas of situated cognition, and the constructivist developmental paradigm.

Intelligence was traditionally assumed to be part of an individual's make-up, and cognition was an activity that took place in a mind independent of context. As Descartes stated, "*I think, therefore I am.*" Looking at cognition from this perspective, the roles of other human beings or of the physical environment in which the thinking is taking place are not accounted for: cognition is contained within the mind of a single person.

Research on cognition conducted from this decontextualized perspective was (and is) carried out in laboratories and with paradigms that assumed scientific objectivity and the possibility of universalist accounts of mental processes: the belief that all humans think in basically the same way. Often this perspective leads to variations in cognitive behavior among individuals being judged on a fixed scale of development, such as with IQ tests.

However, just as the definition of literacy has expanded in recent times to include the social, so has thinking about cognition. Many researchers now believe that "Knowledge and learning are considered to be situated in particular physical and social contexts," (Borko & Putnam, 1998, p. 36). Borko and Putnam suggest that, "Every cognitive act must be understood as a specific response to a specific set of circumstances" (ibid.). Many theorists refer to this phenomenon as situated cognition, and place just as much emphasis on the social context as on the physical (time, location, etc.). Rogoff stresses, "It is essential to view the cognitive activities of individuals within the cultural context in which their thinking is embedded." (Rogoff, 1990, p. 42). She explains:

> Cognitive activities occur in socially structured situations that involve values about the interpretation and management of social relationships. Individuals' attempts to solve problems are intrinsically related to social and societal values and goals, tools, and institutions in the definition of the problems and the practice of their solution (Rogoff, p. 61).

Sociocultural variations affect the *process* of cognition, not just the *content* of cognition. Even before an individual begins a cognitive task, how that task is defined will influence what approach they might take. Being asked to read a non-fiction text out loud by a teacher in a classroom is different from being asked by a child to read a story. Each instance is framed by power relations, degrees of familiarity, and routines that are established in each setting. Performance on a given task might be affected by the context of the activity.

◆ **MAKING CONNECTIONS:** Think of four different contexts in which the following activities could take place. How would each context shift the experience and requirements of the act?

Act 1: Signing your name

| Context | Meaning (or experience) of the act |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

Act 2: Writing a letter of complaint

| Context | Meaning (or experience) of the act |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

The cognitive demands of reading and writing words change according to their written contexts, and it cannot be assumed that automatic recognition of a word in one context ensures automatic recognition in another. To help develop the ability to work in different contexts, literacy development must be focused on situated reading practices, rather than decontextualized drills. Theorists of situated cognition (Wilson, 1993) suggest "authentic activity has to involve situations in which actual cognitive processes are required rather than the simulated processes typically demanded in schooling" (p. 76). For example, workplace literacy programs teach literacy skills as they are needed within specific work contexts. The value of this can be seen in the fact that compared to programs that concentrated on more "general" literacy, adult programs that incorporated job-related materials were associated with larger increases in both job-related and general literacy (Sticht, 1988). Other studies have found that much of the growth made by participants in general literacy programs is likely to be lost if recently learned skills are not applied, and thus practiced, in real-life situations (Brizius & Foster, 1987). Transferring skills, however, between contexts is extremely difficult and rarely accomplished by learners to the degree often assumed by educators (NCAL, 1995). Thus, it would make sense to involve learners in real-life literacy practices *in the classroom* to ease the transference problem.

Indeed, Reder (1994) concludes that interactions in a specific context are essential since the "development and organizational properties of an individual's literacy are shaped by the structure of the social situations in which literacy is encountered and practiced" (p. 48). That is, the type and range of an individual's literacy practices will be shaped by the literacy practices in which they have engaged. This idea that an individual learns while participating in social practices is a key tenet of the constructivist theory of development. Rather than viewing learning as a matter of transferring discrete bits of knowledge from one person to another in a context-independent fashion, "Constructivism contends that people construct meaning through their interpretive interactions with and experiences in their social environments" (Brown, 1998, p. 6).

In one account of constructivism, some key principles are posited:

Knowledge is physically constructed by learners who are involved in active learning.

Knowledge is symbolically constructed by learners who are making their own representations of action.

Knowledge is socially constructed by learners who convey their meaning making to others.

Knowledge is theoretically constructed by learners who try to explain things they don't completely understand (Gagnon & Collay, 1997; cited by Brown, 1998).

Literacy, as an active attempt on the part of an individual to make and convey meaning, can be understood within this framework. Constructivist literacy education engages students in active learning, by having them create their own texts, or by critically responding to texts they are reading. Students also create texts to communicate with other people. Value is seen in engagement in real, or authentic, literacy activity, rather than simulation or "dummy runs" of literacy activities.

### *Discussion Questions*

**What elements of your class would you call constructivist?**

◆

**What are some ways you can increase active learning on the part of your students?**

◆ **MAKING CONNECTIONS:** Return to the student quote at the beginning of the chapter. Consider it in light of:

1) Halliday's functions of language

2) The literacy practices model

3) The nature of Functional Context Education

4) Ideas of situated cognition

5) Constructivist teaching methodologies

## ◆ POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Authentic texts are those that are read and written by people in their lives outside of a context focused on learning to read and write.
- Authentic purposes for reading and writing are those for which people read and write authentic texts outside of a context focused on learning to read and write.
- Literacy is learned and used in context.
- One way to consider purpose is to use Halliday's typology of the functions of language use and ask what function of language a given text is serving to enact.
- The reading and writing of specific texts for socially situated purposes and intents can be termed literacy practices. These literacy practices vary according to both individual habit and cultural preferences.
- Literacy practices often shift due changes in individual's lives. New practices are introduced, and old ones may disappear.
- Literacy, as an act of cognition, is affected by the context it takes place in. Different contexts will affect how literacy acts are conducted.
- Learners need to be actively engaged in using and producing real texts, not simulations of real world reading and writing.

## ◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: What did you read and write this week?

**READING/ADULT**

1) In the past week, did you read any ads, like store ads, classified ads, coupons or flyers?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

2) In the past week, did you read bills, a bank statement, receipt, or paycheck stub?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

3) In the past week, did you read words on medicine bottles, lotions, or other personal items?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

4) In the past week, did you read any books, stories, or religious books?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

5) In the past week, did you read print on a calendar or appointment book?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

6) In the past week, did you read any comics, a comic book, comic strip, or cartoon in the newspaper?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

7) In the past week, did you read a document, like a lease, mortgage, or notice about public assistance?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

8) In the past week, did you read captions, like those on pictures, walls (graffiti), posters, illustrations, or maps?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

9) In the past week, did you read any directions? Like recipes, shopping lists, information about how to care for your pet, even print on appliances?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

10) In the past week, did you read an essay, composition, or "true story," like a church history?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

11) In the past week, did you do any reading at home for your job?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

12) In the past week, did you read any labels or titles on things like household items, toys, books, articles, magazines, newspapers, or cars?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

13) In the past week, did you read print on tickets, like lottery tickets, game or concert tickets?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

14) In the past week, did you read any menus?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

15) In the past week, did you read any messages or notes, or text on a greeting card?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

16) In the past week, did you read any phone books, like an address, or the Yellow Pages?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

17) In the past week, did you read any print on envelopes? More than just the name?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

18) In the past week, did you read any periodicals for information or pleasure, like the horoscope or sports scores in a newspaper or magazine?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

19) In the past week, did you read any books, or an encyclopedia for information, like about dogs, important people, or sports stuff?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

20) In the past week, did you read any postal letters?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

21) In the past week, did you read any signs: store signs, traffic signs, directional signs, school signs?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

22) In the past week, did you read any school communication or information, like about special programs, camps, or day care?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

23) In the past week, did you read any schedules or guides, like bus schedules, TV or cable guides?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

24) In the past week, did you read any song lyrics, jingles, or directions on sheet music?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

25) In the past week, did you read any print on food containers, like questions on a cereal box?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

26) In the past week, did you read any print on home entertainment, like print on game pieces, a game board, print on cassettes, videotapes, CD's, the TV screen, even the TV itself?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

**READING/CHILD CENTERED**

1) In the past week, did you read any children's dictations, like stories children write?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

2) In the past week, did you read a storybook to a child?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

3) In the past week, did you read greeting cards, maybe a Valentine Day's card or a message on a birthday cake, for a child?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

4) In the past week, did you read homework for a child?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

5) In the past week, did you read any individual words, like when a child asks you to read a word?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

6) In the past week, did you read any school work papers for a child?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

7) In the past week, did you read print on trading cards, like baseball and football cards, for a child?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

### WRITING/ADULT

1) In the past week, did you write names and addresses on envelopes?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

2) In the past week, did you write a check, money order, or gift certificate?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

3) In the past week, did you write on a calendar, or appointment book?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

4) In the past week, did you write a caption on a picture?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

5) In the past week, did you write things like speeches, religious writing, reflections, stories, or poetry?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

6) In the past week, did you fill out forms, like job applications, order forms from a catalogue, forms for insurance, or public assistance?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

7) In the past week, did you write at home for your job like schedules or incident reports?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

8) In the past week, did you write lists: shopping lists, things-to-do lists, a list of questions, a list of game directions?
*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

9) In the past week, did you write messages, notes?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

10) In the past week, did you write messages on greeting cards, or "To" or "From" cards on gifts?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

11) In the past week, did you write names, like for labeling?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

12) In the past week, did you write (postal) letters?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

13) In the past week, did you print/write instructions?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

14) In the past week, did you write notes to a school or teacher?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

**WRITING/CHILD**

1) In the past week, did you write alphabet letters, spell words, print instructions, or model alphabet letters, for a child?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

2) In the past week, did you write down stories or other pieces of writing for a child?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

3) In the past week, did you write lists for a child, like shopping lists, things-to-do lists, a list of questions, a list of game directions?

*You (at home)* ________________ *Students (during classtime)* ________________

Final Question: Can you think of anything else you have read or written?

CHAPTER TWO

# Getting to Know Students

*"And I had forgotten about readin' and everything up until last year. My kids left and then I started tryin' to better myself."*

—Student participant in the LPALS

The first time María's adult literacy teacher asked her to choose a trade book — one that is commercially available — to read at home, she didn't know what to pick. She had never read a book on her own before, so she asked her teacher for help. Without a second thought, the teacher handed her a book entitled *Beauty and the Business*, saying, "I think this is great for you." María's teacher had learned, through class discussions and by talking to her after class, that María enjoyed cutting hair, and had even done it for money, but was unable to get a job in a good salon because she lacked the literacy skills to pass the licensing exam. *Beauty and the Business* mirrored María's life closely. It is about a woman who has a talent for cutting people's hair, but needs to pass the GED and the licensing test to get a job in a salon. María read the book with enjoyment because "it had to do [with], like, part of me, you know. And it was good. It was good."

Finding the perfect book for Maria is an ideal example of how students and teachers can engage in productive dialogue about potential reading matter or study topics. As teachers learn more about their students, they can seek out materials that complement and build on students' interests and backgrounds. One tutor in the LPALS noted, "My student gets particularly excited when I ask him for his suggestion and then we study that very thing."

Bringing in texts that teachers think reflect their students' interests does not mean that students will want to use them. A class that has been meticulously planned can fail if the students are not interested in the topic, or don't see the text as serving any real purpose for them.

One of the teachers in the LPALS described a situation in which her ideas and the students' desires simply did not match up. She explained, "There was a newspaper article, a really short article in the TV section, on stereotypes in the media. I thought the learners would really understand it, but it turned out they didn't really care, it wasn't really interesting for them, and didn't work." She felt that this happened because she had misread the situation, "I brought in my own interest. I really wanted to do this; I thought that they would be receptive or understanding of it, but they were not." Another teacher said, "I think the materials and activities reflect my perspective of real life reading and writing materials very accurately. I try to expose my students to a variety of print. I'm not sure how closely it reflects their view of real life reading and writing." We suggest that the chances of this happening can be greatly reduced if the text is seen by the students as fulfilling a real-world function, and is one in which they have expressed an interest.

### *Discussion Questions*

**How do you get to know your students?**

◆

**What do you think you need to know about your students?**

◆

**What texts have you chosen based on specific comments made by your students?**

Providing contextualized materials and activities for their adult students is not something teachers can easily do, based on first impressions or a single conversation. Taking the effort to learn about their students over time, to find out what kinds of reading and writing are important to them, and to understand the contexts of their lives prepares teachers to provide a learning environment that best meets students' needs. This cannot happen overnight, but the teachers with whom we spoke all indicated that the effort to learn about the lives of students is a priority from the very moment they begin their classes.

Teachers we spoke to agreed that learning about the backgrounds of students, particularly their family backgrounds, is necessary. Family literacy practitioners typically assume that the students in their programs have children, and then seek more detailed information. To help create a classroom that responds to each family's specific needs, teachers ask how old their students' children are, and what kinds of reading and writing they and their children engage in, or would like to engage in, at home.

For teachers of ABE or ESOL classes, understanding students' family situations is no less important. Many adult learners, whether they're in family literacy programs or not, cite their children or their grandchildren as being an important impetus to joining a literacy program. Teachers find it useful to know, for example, students' marital status, whether students are parents, and what role reading plays within their home setting. Teachers can learn more about the students' lives by asking questions such as, "Tell me more about your kids (or grandkids). What are they good at? What kinds of things do they enjoy doing most? How do they do in school? What subjects are they strongest and weakest in?" The answers will often provide a picture of students' motivations for joining an adult literacy class. Parents may want to become more proficient in areas in which their children need the most help, or they may want to learn more about that which interests their children.

Students' family backgrounds help shape their desire to focus on certain texts in other ways. An older student who had completed eighth grade and was enrolled in a family literacy program reported reading documents for the first time when the adoption of her grandchildren was in progress. She has continued to read the documents giving her parental rights to "reassure herself that the adoption ... is final and to feel good about having gotten them." One woman's experience with reading menus captures the effect of changing relationship status on literacy practice. She reported that she first began reading menus when her first husband died. He did not like to go out to eat, so the need and opportunity to read menus had never arisen. After he died, she began to go to restaurants, a practice she enjoys. The frequency with which she reads menus is decreasing, ironically, since beginning a new relationship with a man who, like her deceased husband, prefers to eat at home.

While engaged in conversation with students about their backgrounds, it always helps to keep in mind this primary rule (taken from Kantian ethics): always treat people as ends in themselves, and not as means to an end. Teachers who are most successful in getting information that will help students in class are completely in the moment with and respectful of the students. They are revealing personal, sometimes traumatic, experiences.

We now turn to two main ways in which teachers get to know students' contexts. The first is through the intake process, and the second is via in-class activities. We then address issues that may arise when teachers and students are revealing personal information to each other.

## ◆ GETTING TO KNOW STUDENTS THROUGH THE INTAKE PROCESS

*"But I like to read something that is really true and to fact. That keeps my interest up a lot."*

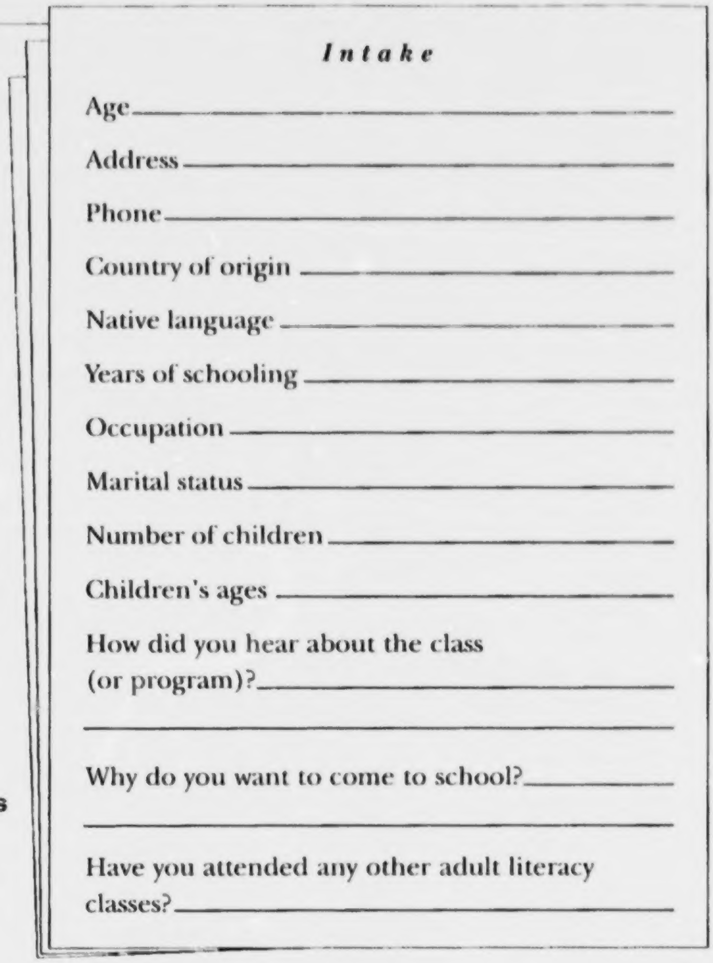
—Student participant in the LPALS

Intake is the process by which new students get registered for class, and by which the center or program learns more about the student. Most intake forms contain similar questions, such as those in the illustration on page 31.

Teachers tend to agree that the typical intake process does not always provide the most useful information about students. The intake usually provides a general picture of students' skill levels in reading, and perhaps it includes the goals that students have. The reading level provided is usually derived from a standardized test, which has limited value in assessing how much reading and writing students are capable of doing in specific contexts. To supplement the information, many teachers explore more open-ended topics with students as part of the intake procedure before the students begin class.

### Talking About Prior Schooling Experiences

For example, Nancy and Barbara, two ABE teachers in Illinois, find it useful to talk with new students about their prior experiences with schooling.



*Intake*

Age

Address

Phone

Country of origin

Native language

Years of schooling

Occupation

Marital status

Number of children

Children's ages

How did you hear about the class (or program)?

Why do you want to come to school?

Have you attended any other adult literacy classes?

"We have a conversation about their educational background, and their sense of what they need to know, because, very often, they can tell us what their strengths are and what they need to work on." They ask students about how far they got in school, whether or not they were in special classes, what their experiences were in school. This provides them with a sense of their students' attitudes about schooling, and alerts them to any special needs that may need to be addressed in the current class setting.

### Setting Academic Goals Together

In addition, Nancy and Barbara believe that students often have a good sense of what their academic needs are, and so they work on setting goals together with the students. Often, in an intake, a student will say that his or her goal is to learn to read better. When this happens, Nancy or Barbara push the student to be more specific, i.e. "What in particular will help you to be a better reader?" They find that if they ask questions like this, students are usually able to narrow it down to "Well, I need to know the sounds of the letters" or "I need to be able to remember what I read" or "I need to be able to fill out forms at work." Once students have identified more specific literacy needs, it is much easier to set more meaningful goals for the class.

Anita, an ESOL teacher in Massachusetts, also asks students what their goals are for their own, out-of-class reading. She, too, focuses on getting specific responses from her students, such as, "I want to practice writing a letter to my daughter's teacher" or "I want to practice reading notes from my kids' school." In addition, Anita conducts informal surveys of her new students, to learn more about the reading and writing they do. Sitting across from a new student, she asks questions such as, "Do you like to write? What do you like to write? Do you like to read? What do you like to read?" She then probes more deeply, asking, for example, "When do you do that type of reading? Why?"

### Learning Students' Strengths

In addition to tracking students' particular literacy needs, both within school and out-of-school, getting to know students also involves learning their strengths. During intake, Nancy and Barbara ask their students, "Name three things that you're good at." These do not have to be academic strengths, although they can be. Asking students to name their strengths emphasizes what they already know and have already mastered, and prevents the discussion from focusing exclusively on their needs. This is helpful because it counters the "deficit orientation" which categorizes students by what they "lack." Students themselves often get caught up in the deficit orientation when thinking about their own literacy skills. Helping students to recognize their pre-existing skills and strengths can provide important measures of self confidence.

Nancy and Barbara often use information about students' strengths to enhance instruction in their classes. For example, they once had a student who wanted to learn how to use a ruler. This was something they had no intention of teaching in class, but they knew that one of their other students had named this as one of his strengths, so they made time during class for the two students to work together, one teaching the other how to use a ruler. As Nancy says, "It's not only what they can't do, but what *can* they do."

### *Discussion Questions*

**Have you gone through the intake process with your students?**

◆

**What have you learned about your students through the intake process that you have found useful?**

◆

**What do you wish you could have asked?**

## ◆ GETTING TO KNOW STUDENTS DURING CLASS

Teachers cannot *really* get to know students through the initial intake, no matter how in-depth it may be. Building genuine relationships with students takes time. Different teachers have different ways of getting to know their students. Providing specific formats for sharing stories, thoughts, and ideas during class is an important way to break down the walls between teachers and learners. Most of the following ideas do not just promote relationship building, they also build on students' literacy skills, so teachers need not feel like getting to know their students takes time away from academic needs.

### Class Discussion Time

Most teachers we talked to agree that spending time just listening to what their students have to say is critical to learning the contexts of their students' lives. Some instructors set aside class time each week for class discussions; others just let discussions happen informally. Jennifer, a family literacy teacher, says, "…In order to be good in this profession I think you need to be empathetic, in that you are really aware of how to read a person. Because if you go into it with a set idea of what you are going to do and are blind to people's reactions, then I think it is going to make your job more difficult." Class discussions teach her about students' interests and issues. This helps her reconsider her instructional priorities and begin bringing her students' needs and interests into her daily lesson planning.

A few teachers from our study also set aside time for discussions at the end of some classes; the discussions are not about reading or writing, but about life. The time allotted is generally short (about 10 minutes), but it gives students the sense that what they have to say matters. And, if students are having problems, then they have the shared wisdom of their fellow students and teachers and can get advice and understanding. These teachers believe that careful listening during these and other discussion times is extremely important. One of the ways they build trust between themselves and their students is always to be empathetic listeners. Through class discussions, the students learn that their teachers are truly interested in and respectful of what they have to say.

Phyllis, a literacy tutor from California, also says that listening is an important part of her job. She worked with a student who had many problems outside of her reading and writing difficulties, and Phyllis felt that just listening to her talk about these problems, whether to help her strategize or just commiserate, was an essential part of their tutoring time. Oftentimes, life's problems can get in the way of learning; by building in time for talking about these problems, teachers can help students to clear their minds for learning.

Class discussions can be started in many different ways. Some teachers use "codes," words or phrases written on the board or on a piece of paper, for students to read and analyze (see Freire's work using codes). A word such as money, or taxes, or pollution can get conversation started. Often, visual stimuli, such as photos or paintings, are effective at getting students to begin to talk. Or, class time can be set aside for a discussion of the news. In each of these cases, class discussions will probably begin on an abstract or generalized level. It is best to start with questions for the group, and to avoid discussion of specific students' situations. Students will not immediately personalize the subject and speak to personal truths or needs. Teachers must see what connections students are making and work with them. Given time and support, students begin to really discuss what they are thinking, and what they need, which will point the way to the kinds of literacy work they desire. Most importantly, while the teacher may choose the code, students must feel that the discussion is as organic as possible. Heavy-handed guidance of a conversation does not work well. One way to help with this process is for the class itself to set ground rules for class discussions or class work. Ask the students to provide examples of what they think are sensitive questions and the reasons why they feel that way.

Any approach to starting class discussions to learn more about students and their literacy needs is really possible. One of the authors of this book is interested in proverbs, and often brings them into class. When working with a group of Haitian students, he used as a discussion starter the Haitian proverb, "piti piti zwazo fè nich li," which means "little by little the bird builds its nest." Students were able to point out what "little" steps they wanted to make on their way to a having a larger set of literacy skills.

Getting to know about the family lives and backgrounds of ESOL students can be challenging. In beginning level ESOL classes, students may not have the ability to talk about their families in depth in English. This hurdle can be overcome if teachers speak the native language of the students. However, many ESOL teachers work in classrooms where students speak a variety of native languages, and it is unlikely that they speak each student's native language. In these cases, teachers may have to begin by making "family" the theme for a series of lessons. After students master the English words "children" or "spouse," they can begin to express some of their thoughts about their family.

Listening to students is not something that happens only during a set discussion time. The teachers we spoke to find that really listening to students is something they do all the time. It helps keep their teaching grounded in their students' lives and aware of what genuinely matters to students, in contrast to teachers' beliefs about their students' lives and what they think is best for them.

An example of this type of listening and response to students occurred when Nancy's students asked her to incorporate spelling lessons into the curriculum. Nancy's first instinct was to say, "No, no way, we are NOT doing spelling!" But the interchange did not stop there. The students were insistent that spelling was something they needed, and though she was reluctant to teach spelling because of the decontextualized nature of most spelling lessons, Nancy realized that this was actually quite important to them. Nancy listened to the students, asked them what kind of spelling they wanted to do, and discovered that what they really wanted to be able to do was write checks without making spelling errors. Spelling, therefore, became a more authentic activity as students learned how to spell number words in the context of writing checks. Nancy could have assumed a "teacher knows best" role in this situation, but she listened to her students, and together they created spelling lessons that met everyone's needs.

### *Discussion Questions*

**What do you think makes someone an empathetic listener?**

◆

**Do you consider yourself one?**

◆

**What strategies for learning about your students through class discussions have you found useful?**

### Journals

Journals also can help teachers get better sense of their students' contexts for literacy use and learning. Barbara provides her students with 10 to 15 minutes during each class to write in journals. She encourages them to write about anything they want. Students often start out writing about such innocuous events as what they had for dinner, or what their plans are for the weekend. No matter the content, Barbara always writes back. Over time, some students begin to write more about themselves, and to open up, and Barbara responds in kind. When appropriate, she lets her students know that she has either had similar experiences or that she can relate to the problem at hand. In this way, she comes to know students, particularly those who don't feel comfortable disclosing personal information in front of the entire class, on a deeper level.

Barbara doesn't push students to make personal disclosures, however. She says, "You kind of know where they're at, in terms of how personal to get. It's really…that's the nature of the writing." The journals provide a way for the students and Barbara to communicate with each other. While the students get valuable reading and writing practice, they also are writing for a purpose: engaging in a private, ongoing conversation with their teacher, about topics that truly matter to them. Since this is how journals are used in the world outside of the classroom, they are a good example of an authentic activity.

*Discussion Questions*

**How comfortable would you be introducing art into your class?**

◆

**How do you think your students would respond to the suggestion to use art in class?**

◆

**What kind of art do you think they would prefer?**

### Using Drawings for Self-Expression

Anita uses drawing to learn more about the literacy and language needs of her ESOL students. She asks them to draw pictures of the last time they had trouble speaking, reading, or writing English. One student, for example, drew a picture of himself in an airplane, trying to fill out the I-94 forms that are required when entering this country. Another student drew a picture of herself in the doctor's office, trying to fill out insurance forms. Anita uses this activity not only to learn about her students, but also to learn what types of literacy practices she needs to address during class.

### Shared Reading Time

Another way that Barbara fosters relationship building during class is to provide time for students to read aloud from a story they have written or a reading passage they particularly like. Barbara feels that when students are given the time to read something they have written, they begin to feel like actual writers. Knowing that they will be sharing what they write provides students with an authentic purpose and audience for writing. Rather than just writing down a story that only the teacher will read, students know that their entire class will "read" their writing by listening to it. Similarly, when students are given the opportunity to read aloud a passage they have read silently, it provides them with a new, communicative, reason for reading. Reading for these students need not be a solitary event. If they read a particularly interesting, moving, or exciting passage, they can share and discuss it with others. Not only does this shared reading time allow teachers and students to learn more about the other students' interests, experiences, and backgrounds, but students feel that they are important contributors to the class: their ideas, thoughts, and feelings matter and are worthy of attention during class.

## ◆ SHARING PERSONAL HISTORIES

Sharing personal information is a delicate process. One teacher criticized the approach she used when she was just starting to teach.

> *"You have to be careful sometimes because people can be very emotional. When I first started this job I was so naive. 'So, tell me about coming to United States for you.' 'I walked two months across the deserts of Mexico, and I had my baby, and my [sibling] drowned crossing the Rio Grande'."*

It may be true of students from all kinds of adult literacy classes, but ESOL students especially may not always be willing to share personal information about their families. In many cases, they have had to leave children, spouses or parents behind in their native countries. The students may come from countries that have experienced a great deal of turmoil. What an American teacher may think of as a friendly question, such as "What does your father do?" may sound very different to someone who has lost a parent to political violence. Teachers must be careful to read students' reactions to questions about families, and shift the topic when it seems that a student is not comfortable with the conversation. This is true for native-born students, as well. Teachers do not have a right to know, nor are students mandated to divulge personal information. The purpose of personal discussions is to provide direction for instruction. The teachers in our study sought ways to link students' problems to literacy activities.

Helping students cope with stressful situations does not require a degree in social work; often it just requires empathy and common sense. For example, when it came out in class that a female student was a victim of domestic abuse, Nancy and Barbara helped her to find a woman's shelter, made sure she had the phone number of the local police, and listened to her as she worked through the problem. Another teacher who had a student who was at risk for being homeless obtained subsidized housing forms for the student to fill out during class. If students bring to class problems such as alcoholism, deadbeat dads, or housing crises, teachers can help them to take proactive actions by finding websites on the Internet or bringing in books that provide information about the problems. Students can be encouraged to write in journals about their problems, or to write plans of action.

One concern that teachers often raise is the danger of learning too much about their students. When class becomes a place for sharing the context of students' and teachers' lives, hard issues do emerge, often in ways that require an immediate response. Teachers often express the fear that they will be burdened with many roles: not just teacher, but also counselor, social worker, policeman, or judge.

Many teachers believe that listening and sharing is part of their teaching. They cannot separate this from the rest of their curriculum, nor do they feel they should. In a contextualized classroom, the students' lives are the driving force of the curriculum, so it is essential that an openness exists among teachers and students: a willingness to learn as much as is feasible about each other, within the classroom context. However, a student may bring up something the teacher and other classmates simply don't know how to handle. Some teachers may be tempted to respond by not promoting a sharing environment. However, most of the teachers that we spoke with see their roles as occasionally going beyond just "teaching." None of them advocate stepping into the role of social worker, but part of the empathetic listening these teachers support includes providing guidance to students when the moment dictates.

Teachers struggle to ensure that they are not overburdened by students' problems. Even in classrooms where teachers have worked to build relationships with their students and to keep the lines of communication open, they set limits as well. Some of the teachers with whom we spoke expressed feelings of being overwhelmed at times. Phyllis reached a point where she had to question her relationship with a student who had many personal problems. She wondered if she had become too involved with her, and if the relationship needed to change. She decided that she needed to be more honest with her student. Though she did not want to change the relationship, she let her student know when she could not help her.

Whereas Phyllis decided she would continue at the same level of personal involvement, Lauren, who taught in a family literacy program, decided that she needed to cut back the extent to which she was assisting students in their personal lives. She said, "I try not to engage too much in social work. Because it gets really tricky, and I've gotten caught before where it's just too much, and I cannot put myself in the position again of being their helper, helping them with their lives. For the most part, just listening is a good idea."

The choices teachers make about helping students should be based on their comfort level, as well as their level of expertise. In the case of something like drug addiction, for example, a teacher should not take on the responsibility of solving the student's problem. Responses may include providing numbers of drug treatment centers, bringing in information about drug abuse, or providing

### *Discussion Questions*

**Imagine that a student comes to you and confides that she has been the victim of domestic abuse. How would you deal with this?**

◆

**What would you be willing to do to help your student?**

◆

**What wouldn't you be willing to do?**

an empathetic ear. Teachers are not counselors and they are not social workers, and must set limits on what they can do for students. It is helpful if the teachers are not perceived as the experts in all areas. Though teachers can provide support, the burden for change is on the students themselves, and students should not expect teachers to solve their problems for them.

### Teachers Opening Up

Getting to know students is not a one-way street. Most teachers with whom we spoke share some personal information while learning about their students. Lisa believes that, to keep the student/teacher relationship on a more equal footing, she has to give of herself. She says, "I don't think you need to confess every detail, but just a few things about yourself..." She believes her students offer a lot of information about themselves, often in a very public way, and it can be a very emotional experience for them. It helps if teachers can also share a bit about themselves, portraying themselves as more human, with many different roles in their lives other than teacher.

Phyllis is very reflective about why it is important to share a bit of herself with the woman she tutors: "Well, I let her in on a lot...I felt that it wouldn't be fair for me to [just deal with her life issues], that it might make me appear as if I have a perfect life, with all the answers. I thought that it would be important for me to acknowledge that I myself was working on certain issues that she might be working on as well." She believes it helps her students deal with their problems if they realize that they are not the only ones that have those problems. Phyllis feels that this is mutually beneficial: sharing her experiences helps her students, and it also helps her.

*Discussion Questions*

**How much do you already share about yourself with your students?**

◆

**What do you feel it is appropriate to share?**

◆

**Are there areas of your life that are off limits to your students? What are they?**

Lauren, the family literacy teacher, is a first generation, American-born Chinese with parents who were immigrants. Because of her background, she feels she has a lot to share with her students, who are immigrants raising American-born children. She reveals her history because she believes it helps build a good connection between her and her students, and also in case her experiences can be instructive to her students.

## ◆ POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Establishing a contextualized classroom that uses activities and materials that reflect students' lives requires taking the time to get to know them: their backgrounds, their interests, their family relationships.
- Consider modifying the intake process to include personal interviews, designed to go beyond simply learning about academic ability.
- Many common classroom activities, such as journaling and class discussions, can be used to engage students in authentic topics of interest to them, while simultaneously providing useful information about their interests and concerns.
- To create an atmosphere in which students feel free to share personal information, teachers must open up about themselves.
- Students may reveal information that seems to require action. Teachers must decide how much they are willing to help students deal with personal problems, and should never do more than they are completely comfortable doing. The level of involvement depends on the comfort level of the teacher.

CHAPTER THREE

# *Using Authentic Materials and Activities in the Classroom*

> *"I remember the first time I went to go vote I didn't even understand what they want. Now I go to the voting deal, and I understand what they want. And I read between the lines instead of saying 'what do they want?' "*
>
> —Student participant in the LPALS

Two key factors make texts in the classroom authentic: the *type of text* and *the purposes for reading or writing that text.* A text is considered authentic if it is one of a type that is used by people in the world outside of a learning-to-read/write setting (school). Further, the reading or writing of that text type is considered authentic if the purposes for reading or writing that text include the purpose for which it would be read or written in out-of-school contexts.

Teachers in the LPALS who used authentic materials were articulate about both of these factors. They pointed to the world of print their students inhabit outside of the classroom, and the roles that certain texts played in their students' lives. Given the unique nature of each student's life, and the diverse population within each classroom, teachers did not mention one published workbook or series that regularly provided the sorts of texts their students required. This is not to suggest that textbooks or workbooks are, by definition, inauthentic. One teacher in the study noted, "I was in a program and we were almost oppressively avoiding textbooks and workbooks in a class, almost in a negative way, it was kind of a weird thing. And now I realize, it's okay, books are good things, I like books, there are good books that you can use. I would encourage people to use workbooks as resources." The value of a book or a textbook is determined by how it helps a given student in a given context. However, because of the narrow scope of many textbooks, teachers in our study who used authentic materials found themselves collecting a variety of materials and building their syllabi as they went along. LPALS teachers also created their own materials and often had their students do so, as well.

This chapter focuses on different ways in which teachers can identify, acquire, and use authentic texts in their literacy classes. We illustrate the concept of authentic text types and purposes with some of experiences and text types used by teachers in the LPALS. Finally, the process of using authentic instruction is not always an easy one, and we highlight some of the hurdles the LPALS teachers faced, and the lessons they learned.

## ◆ IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT TEXT TYPES

Once teachers and students begin to look at the outside world for possible texts to use in class, there is really no limit to what types of texts might be incorporated. Students wanting to get their driver's license can bring in driver's manuals, some students bring in religious books such as the Bible, and a few may want to work on reading the instructions from weight loss programs. Other students create newspapers for their class or their program. One very active student created a "Job Opportunities Book" for her school by convincing the city to send job postings to the school two days before they were sent to the local paper. This gave students in the program a better chance to get hired. The same student created a scrapbook for the program, detailing all the major events, including graduation. Given the opportunity to read materials that really connected to their lives outside of school, students responded by putting in a real effort.

Some students become very proactive in their use of letters to make themselves heard. For example, to protest changes in welfare policies, some students wrote letters to local officials. Another student wrote a letter to a lawyer and sent copies to the welfare department and unemployment office. One wrote a letter to a bill collector, who then stopped harassing the student. Yet another student wrote to an editor of a local paper about the poor road condition near her house. This led a TV crew to come to interview the student. After the publicity, the roads to her trailer and road to the trailer court were fixed.

## ◆ TYPES AND USES OF TEXTS USED BY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN THE LPALS

At times, students may have texts such as job applications on hand, but teachers often have to be quite resourceful to get the materials they need. Sometimes it is easier to identify the texts students wish to use than it is to get them. Perhaps for those reasons, some of the same texts seem to be used in the majority of the classes. We highlight six of these text types: newspapers; applications; flyers, brochures, schedules; assessment reports; election materials; and fiction and creative writing.

### ◆ CHART: Types and Uses of Texts Used by Teachers and Students in the LPALS

reading want ads
writing resume, cover letter
writing work memos
reading driver's manual
reading truck licensing manual
reading book on plumbing
completing food handler's permit
reading instruction manuals for household items
reading children's books
reading fiction
completing voter registration cards
reading letters from bank
reading receipts
reading welfare rules
filling out loan paperwork to buy a car
reading probation and house arrest rules
reading diet/exercise book that the student follows at home
using Internet search engines
designing personal web pages
writing letters to friends
writing letters to public officials
writing letter to lawyer
writing letter to bill collectors
writing letter to editor

### Newspapers

While many workbooks have detailed simulations of newspaper content (e.g., TV schedules, help wanted sections), their use is limited to the pedagogical aim of the lesson. Students cannot use the content of the simulated newspaper. Students who interact with real newspapers, however, can look for an actual job, or find the TV program that they want to watch that evening. For this reason, many teachers and students use newspapers in the classroom. The easiest way to provide the class with newspapers is to subscribe. While the cost may seem prohibitive, many publishers have programs designed to get newspapers into classroom for free or at a reduced price. Call the local paper to see if it has such a program. Many newspapers also have Internet editions that are nearly complete, so students who can go online can also access them in that way.

### ◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: Using the Newspaper

Have you used newspapers in class? How? ______________________

How might you use these sections of the newspaper?

Local News ______________________

International News ______________________

Editorial Pages ______________________

Sports______________________

Arts ______________________

Automotive ______________________

What other sections might be useful for student work? ______________________

______________________

What sections might be difficult to use in class? ______________________

______________________

## Applications

Paperwork is an unavoidable aspect of life today. We are constantly being asked to complete applications: for health insurance, for renting an apartment, for getting a job. Many workbooks have generic applications that allow students to practice certain isolated skills such as writing addresses. However, filling out a real job application moves students one step closer to getting the job they want. In addition, while applications have many common features, they do vary in structure and information requested. Seeing one generic application will not prepare students for the large variety they might encounter on a job search. A variety of different applications are easily available to the general public. For example, if students wish to register to vote, get applications from the local election office. Health centers have copies of documents that patients must complete before they can see a doctor. As with newspapers, many forms are available on-line. In addition, it is worth contacting the offices relevant to students to talk about the class's work. Sometime

*Discussion Questions*

**What was the last application you filled out?**

◆

**How comfortable were you?**

◆

**What experience do you think your students have in filling out forms?**

◆ **MAKING CONNECTIONS: What types of the following texts do your students encounter outside of class?**

Forms and Applications ____________________

____________________

Schedules/Flyers/Brochures ____________________

____________________

School-related Materials ____________________

____________________

Election-related Materials ____________________

____________________

officials from the offices offer to talk to classes about the application process, and how to fill out the form itself.

*Discussion Questions*

**Have you used brochures, flyers, or schedules in class?**

◆

**What was your experience?**

### Flyers, Brochures, Schedules

Many students and teachers in the LPALS report using a variety of short texts, such as flyers and brochures. These texts usually focus on one issue, and contain helpful advice and important contact information. Of all the types of informational brochures available, students in the study seemed to be most interested in reading the health-related brochures they find at their doctor's offices or health clinics. Some classes also reported working with schedules, such as bus schedules. A bus schedule in a workbook may be a good approximation of what students see in their communities, but the actual bus schedule for the bus they take is much more relevant and immediately useful. If students don't bring these materials in themselves, the only way to gather them is to get out of the classroom and into the neighborhood. One of the authors of this book is an ESOL teacher, and he is on an eternal scavenger hunt, grabbing a few copies of texts he encounters in his daily travels. Items such as bus schedules are available in most large stations or online. As with applications, some social service or employment agencies may be committed to working with the populations from which the students come. Local health centers may have outreach teams that are happy to come to class to walk students through informational handouts. They usually do not have a way to contact teachers, so teachers who take the initiative to contact them get results.

### Assessment Reports

Many adult students are parents of school-age children. In fact, a common reason students give for enrolling in adult literacy classes is to increase their understanding of, and interaction with, their children's schools. In response, many teachers work with assessments children bring home from school. Teachers can focus on learning to read report cards, standardized test results, and reports of other measures schools are using to track academic progress. Adult students can also discuss these assessments, and plan questions for their children's teachers. Since students may be reluctant to bring in their own children's report cards to share with the class (see discussion below), teachers can contact local school departments to ask for sample report cards. School systems usually have resource manuals for parents that explain school policies, including grading. States with standardized tests often publish guidebooks on testing for parents. For example, in Massachusetts, the Board of Education has prepared a guide for parents about how students are assessed on a statewide, standardized test.

*Discussion Questions*

**Have you used school-based assessments as texts in class?**

◆

**What was your experience doing so?**

### Election Materials

Many students and classes in the LPALS noted that class activities helped students to register to vote and to become informed about the issues and the candidates running for office. One student remarked, "Before, when I first started voting, I wasn't reading up on the people who were running. I was just, you know, like voting for one person because I thought I liked them. Now I go read about them, find out what they're all about." Campaign literature comes in many formats, from bumper stickers and simple handbills to longer statement pieces. These are available from candidates' and party campaign offices. Referendum issues are also useful, though these texts are often complex and filled with legal jargon. However, voter organizations such as the League of Women Voters typically publish materials that compare and contrast candidates or ballot questions in ways that are accessible to the general population. The local election commission should have sample ballots that can be brought into class. These are very helpful in getting student to understand the structure of the ballot and the process of actually voting. Some classes have taken this process to its next logical step: inviting candidates to speak in classrooms. When these invitations are accepted, students can really find out what the candidates "are all about."

*Discussion Questions*

**Have you used election materials in class?**

◆

**What was your experience?**

## Fiction and Creative Writing

Some teachers who use authentic materials wonder about the role of fiction, since it seems to contrast with "authentic." By using the word *authentic*, however, we are stressing that real-life texts be used in the classroom for the same purposes they are used outside of the classroom. From this perspective, reading or writing fiction can be highly authentic, since people engage in this activity all the time. Anita, the ESOL teacher who participated in the LPALS, uses fiction in her classroom because "It's another vehicle for communication and understanding experiences." Once students begin to take fiction home with them, the positive effects are apparent.

One student noted "I read more novels now because of my literacy class, and I go into more detail. I appreciate the story more because of my literacy class. I definitely enjoy reading lots more…for my personal pleasure, as well as for my children's education."

Teachers and students in the study who talked about reading fiction pointed to texts with themes that students relate to, and how that increased their own enjoyment of literature. For example, Anita used the work of Sandra Cisneros because her students are interested in fiction that deals with "urban life, about immigrants or bicultural people." Some teachers use folklore that often has morals that are good discussion starters. The novel *Push*, about an adult education student, was also used in some programs. While these texts were not written for adult learners, some collections of fiction are published for this student population. One such collection is *Words on the Page, The World in Your Hands*, a series of volumes of prose and poetry written or adapted for adult literacy students. Students are often very interested in reading what other adult students have written. Publications that feature student writing are vital resources.

### *Discussion Questions*

**What fiction have you used in class? What was your experience?**

◆

**What fiction might you consider using in class? Why and how?**

◆

**What books are your students reading now?**

Teachers can also use creative writing, such as autobiography and poetry, as a way to address students' lives. Of course, a genuine audience must exist for the writing to be authentic, even if it means that it will only be shared with other members of the class or only read by the author herself (We can note that Emily Dickinson kept all her poetry under wraps during her lifetime). Students may have little experience writing poetry. To get her students started, Anita has them create a class poem, with everyone writing one line. They do this around themes, such as "What is work?" Everyone can offer a definition or a reaction, and this goes into the poem.

One of the authors of this book has had students work with haiku, a traditional form of Japanese poetry that is three lines long. The first line is five syllables, the second line is seven, and third line is five again. For example,

*a hot summer day*
*watch my lemonade glass sweat*
*is it tall enough?*

Haiku and other structured poetry can work well because they give students a framework with which to begin. They also allow students to work with such concepts as syllables. Some students in the study really began to appreciate poetry. One student said, "I've learned how to like poems. You know, I've read poems by Maya Angelou."

Another noted, "I write my own little poems, in my spare time."

Teachers in the LPALS also engaged their students in journal writing, a type of writing new to many students. A typical student reaction in the study was, "I didn't know what a journal was." This lack of exposure related more to the students' experiences with specific types of writing than to their literacy levels. Once they started working with journals in class, many students began to use them outside of school. Students began to keep diaries, or other focused types of writing. One student explained, "I have a prayer journal that I do on my spare time."

### *Discussion Questions*

**Do you like poetry? Have you used it in class?**

◆

**How comfortable would you be using poetry in class?**

◆

**What poets might your students enjoy?**

*Discussion Questions*

**Have you used journals in class? How?**

◆

**How did your students respond to keeping journals?**

◆

**If you haven't used journals, why not?**

In class, students should have notebooks or binders that are dedicated to the journal itself. Teachers can suggest topics, or have journal writing be more open-ended. LPALS teachers and students typically picked a designated time period in class to work on journals or students wrote in them at home. In either case, the teacher collects the journals, reads them, and responds, and, depending upon the teacher, suggests corrections. Comments should create the possibility of student response, thus creating a dialogue between teacher and student. In fact, these are often called *dialogue journals*. In many ways, this is the type of writing that students may engage in with the teacher of their own children, as schools often send notes home to parents.

Teachers differ on what role correction plays in journals. Some teachers believe in minimal correction because they do not want to reduce students' motivation to write, and they hope to stress the self-expression

**◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: Look at the sample student text and teacher response below.**

What would you correct?
What do you think of the teacher's comments?
What would you write to keep the dialogue going?

> I went with my sister to the store the other day. This man looked at us. For a long time we thought. He must be following us. He was thinking that we are going to steal something. This is a problem for us.

Why do you think he was following you? Have you had problems in that store before? Have you had problems like that in other stores?

aspect of journals. Indeed, when writing in journals outside of school, one does not expect to get corrected. However, many students want correction, or feedback on the technical aspects of writing, perhaps more than some teachers want to give.

## ◆ ISSUES RELATED TO TYPE OF TEXT

LPALS teachers mentioned additional problems with getting appropriate authentic texts. The first problem is the need to balance text specificity with privacy, and second is the text's level of difficulty.

### Need for Specific Texts

The value of authentic texts lies in their specificity. Sometimes, generic models are not very helpful. Anita found this to be so when she was developing a lesson on paying bills.

> "It's hard to find things that look like bills that aren't actual bills. You hate using something from a book: not only could it possibly not look anything like a bill that you get, but every bill that you get is different. There are some basic things that work similar in some bills, but the (Department Store) bill looks different than the credit card bill looks different than the phone bill. Everything is different. Unlike an application, where often there may be some basic things that may be applicable across different things, it's hard with bills to find something in a workbook that is five or ten years old and have it be meaningful."

So, Anita decided to use real world bills. However, this was tricky, since, as Anita noted, "You are going to disclose somebody if you're not using something from a book." She explains, "I didn't want to ask students to bring in their bills and make copies of bills that had private numbers on them. So I took a copy of my bill, and whited out the account number, but even then I put myself out a couple of times, like OK, you're going to see

*Discussion Questions*

**Have you dealt with personal issues in attempting to provide authentic texts for your students? What did you do? What would you do differently?**

what my balance is, and I don't really want people to know what my balance is."

Anita has to balance the need to use real bills as text for her lessons with her need for privacy. Teachers need to be mindful of their students' privacy, and to decide what level of privacy they require for themselves. Not all teachers feel comfortable bringing in copies of their own bills. Students may also bring in materials that are of a very personal nature, such as doctor's notes or letters from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Teachers should talk with students about how they want to handle texts that deal with sensitive subjects. One approach is to leave time in each class for one-on-one work with students. A teacher explained, "People come in with their own personal letters that they need to write, and they ask us for help, we tend not to do it too much as a class thing because I noticed that it can be a very personal, touchy subject."

### Authentic Texts Are Often Difficult Texts

The second issue that LPALS teachers mentioned arises from the level of difficulty of a text. Anita noted that, "People would bring things in that were so difficult to read." Indeed, highly authentic and interesting texts may be beyond students' current reading abilities. Although informational brochures about medical issues, for example, are designed for lay readers, the language and literacy skills required is often still fairly high. Anita explained, "It gets worse if it's things that are not so common. This one person wanted to talk about cerebral hemorrhage. You can't find anything in simple language about cerebral hemorrhage." For this reason, some texts must be adapted. Sometimes only parts of pamphlets can be used. For many students, newspapers present a great challenge. Some of the teachers in our study worked around this problem by using *News for You*, a newspaper created specifically for adult learners (see Resources).

The text's level of difficulty is not only a problem for students. At times, teachers find themselves struggling with materials. For example, one LPALS teacher pointed to a time when her program was trying to help adult learners understand how to read their children's report cards. She remembers, "There was a lot of resistance from the teachers on (using) the report cards, because we didn't know how to use them. When we looked at one, it was intimidating, because it's very complicated." They stuck with it, however, and felt better about using the actual report cards "once we got past the volumes of paper that the director gave us with each grade, and all the little boxes that goes with it; once we knew how it really related to what we do at [our program]." Problems like this provide perfect teachable moments, as teachers point out that even they struggle with unfamiliar text types.

**◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: How easy is this text for you to read? What could you do to help a student decipher it?**

Windows Systems Requirements for EPSOM Stylus Color 777/777i

To use your printer and its software, your system should have:

- An IBM@ compatible PC with at least a 486/66 MHz (for Windows 98), Pentium @ 133 MHz (for Windows 2000), or 486/25 MHz (for Windows 95 or Windows NT@ 4.0) processor (Pentium processor recommended)
- For parallel connection: a high-speed, bidirectional, IEEE-1284 compliant parallel cable (6 to 10 feet long) with a D-SUB, 25-pin, male connector for your computer and a 36-pin, Centronics @ compatible connector for the printer.

## ◆ THINKING ABOUT PURPOSE

When selecting an authentic text for use in the classroom, teachers must keep the different purposes for using that text in mind. The primary purpose for using the text should be the same as it would be outside of the classroom. This can be called the "real world purpose." For example, if students are working with the *Yellow Pages*, they should be looking for information that they need, rather than for a list of spelling words chosen by the teacher.

The second purpose for using the text is the instructional purpose, which is typically the concern of the teacher. Many students do not have a lot of experience using the *Yellow Pages* on their own, and may not understand the structure. Teachers using them in their classrooms must be prepared to help students become more comfortable with the format of the text. This may include classroom activities that are thought of as traditional, such as alphabetizing. Words in the text may illustrate a point the teacher has been trying to make (such as a spelling rule), and these can be highlighted.

However, in choosing to work with authentic materials, the "students' real world purpose" always comes first. The instructional purpose should not drive the lesson, but should be part of the support structure the teacher puts in place to help students meet their primary goal of using the text in the same way they would outside of school. While a certain brochure may have vocabulary in it that a teacher wants to introduce to the class, the text's pedagogical function must not replace the student's own reasons for wanting to work with the text, such as answering a question students have about health.

Halliday's functions of language is a framework that can be used to examine the purpose for creating or interacting with a text. It is not the only way to think about the ways language is used in society, but it is a helpful starting point. The goal is to ensure that the text being read or written does serve a purpose or function besides a school-only one. To do that, teachers can ask themselves the following questions:

*Does this text help my student get something they want? (Instrumental)*

*Does this text inform my student about the rules he must follow? (Regulatory)*

*Does this text help my student maintain or establish a personal relationship with someone? (Interactional)*

*Does this text help my student express their personal thoughts? (Personal)*

*Does this text help my student explore the world? (Heuristic)*

*Does this text help my student express or create for someone else an imaginative world? (Imaginative)*

*Does this text provide information my student wants or needs? (Informative)*

As an example, we examine the first four sample text types noted above (newspapers, applications, brochures, and school assessments) to see how they can be utilized to fulfill one (or more) of these seven functions.

Newspapers can be used in many ways. When reading a newspaper to find out about an upcoming concert, the students' activity is an example of the **informative** function of language. Newspapers can also be read in a more open-ended way. Students who begin by reading an article about an environmental summit may finish with information about their own role in climate change. Because newspapers can be read for information in many ways, teachers and students in the LPALS view them as valuable tools. Students can keep up with current events, access information they need, and be introduced to new subjects and ideas via newspapers.

In completing applications and similar forms, students are involved in two different functions of language. The first is the **regulatory** function. Applications themselves work to regulate the behavior of individuals. For example, cars must be insured before being driven. The insurance application forms have rules governing how they must be completed. From the perspective of the student, filling out these forms is an **instrumental** use of language. It is language being used to get something that they want, such as a car or insurance.

School assessment reports also include several functions of language. They provide information about a student's progress, but they are also part of a system that regulates student movement and placement. More personal notifications from schools, such as letters from teachers to parents, are examples of the **interactional** function of language. They are attempts by teachers to connect with parents.

The suggestions above are by no means definitive. A student could use a report card in a heuristic fashion, for example, or a letter sent to the editorial page of the newspaper could be used by a student to help define himself (i.e., the **personal** function of language). What is important is the real-life language purpose the student has in mind.

By focusing on the function of the text, it may also be easier to consider what can be done to extend the lesson, or how one text can be linked to another. For example, after using the phone book to locate a business they wish to contact, students may be able to work with a text that the business provides, such as a menu. This enables class work to become a series of connected, rather than isolated, lessons. Teachers and students can ask themselves, "What other texts is this first text connected to?" and "What other texts would somebody need to use to complete the task at hand?" See Chapter Four for more about using themes to organize classes.

## ◆ CLASS PLANNING ISSUES

One issue that teachers may confront immediately is that a class that relies upon authentic, learner-contextualized materials may not be what students want or expect. One teacher in the study noted that,

> "A lot of the challenge is for the learners themselves, for them to accept the approach, because a lot of them come from very traditional school backgrounds, and they're expecting a workbook or expecting grammar, or expecting a skills-based approach. So if we just kind of throw them in there without any kind of background or explanation of what to expect, I think they get very confused. So what I have been trying to do is to tell them what to expect a little bit."

### *Discussion Questions*

**What do you think most students expect in a literacy classroom in terms of materials and activities?**

◆

**What do students need to understand about an approach to teaching that relies upon authentic materials?**

Not all students respond when asked for their suggestions of what they need to use in daily life. Even when teachers express a desire and willingness to work with real life texts, students don't always accept the offer. One teacher in the LPALS says that her students didn't always bring things in because students "don't think it's their place to tell me." A possible reason for this student reluctance is that students may have a traditional teacher-centered perspective on education. Many of these students expect to be handed texts and told what to do. They trust their teacher to choose important texts for them, and are unused to being asked for their input. It may also be the case that the students do not have that much experience with schooling, or with literacy itself. They might not have had many opportunities to think about what kinds of texts they would like to read, and so when asked about it they are caught a bit off guard. Even with interest inventories and appeals for student input, "Teacher, you decide," is still a commonly heard phrase.

Another reason some students may not willingly accept the chance to provide suggestions for texts to be used in class is low self-esteem. Because of past educational difficulties, these students may feel as if they have lost their right to speak. Adult students might "do whatever their tutor tells them," as one tutor in the study says, because they feel like they do not have any authority. While this is a larger issue than what types of materials teachers use in class, students with low self-esteem must be provided with opportunities to successfully articulate what they want and why. From another perspective, students who have lived through political violence or social upheaval may not yet trust that "free" choices are indeed free.

The teachers in the LPALS who use authentic materials and activities take the time to explain their approach to their students. At the beginning of a semester or project, they talk to students about what they are expecting, and how and why some of those expectations may not be met. Without going into the jargon of constructivism or sociocultural theory, teachers can explain why they believe their approach is valid, and what they see as its value. To make this work, teachers must develop the trust of their students and foster a sense of collaboration in the classroom.

## Keep a Clear and Realistic Sense of What Success Means

Perhaps one reason why workbooks and textbooks are so popular is that they provide a ready-made assessment. In the LPALS, students who were not in classes that were marked by used of authentic materials often made note of their progress by pointing to how many chapters in a book they had completed. Of course, this does not indicate anything about how students are actually using the skills the chapters focused on, or how their understanding of the uses of literacy has changed. Assessments that look at how students use newly learned skills in out-of-school settings, or that document the literacy practices that students begin to use or use more frequently after starting a literacy class, are important when working with authentic materials. We recognize, however, that real world goals can be more difficult to assess (see Chapter Five) than finishing a workbook chapter.

How can students measure success in the literacy practice outside of school? Look to the reasons for engaging in the literacy practice itself. For example, did they pass the driver's test for which they were studying? Did they complete a job application and get the job they wanted? Did they write letters to children who live in another part of the country? These are the real world uses the students have for literacy, and assessment should measure this type of progress.

Students do not have to achieve their stated goals for the work in class to be considered successful. One tutor in the LPALS worked with a student on completing paperwork to apply for a small business loan for the student. The tutor even accompanied the student to workshops offered by the Small Business Administration. In the end, the student did not get the loan because of the cost of insuring the proposed business. This was not because of a lack of effort or skill development; it was related to the economics of starting and running a small business. The tutor felt bad that the business wouldn't be starting. She decided, however, "What I felt was important was for me to demonstrate how to do problem solving using literacy skills, and then to expose her to all of the resources that were available through our reading program — which were really great —

and also through the community." In this sense, while the goal of the real-world literacy activity was unsuccessful, the student learned about literacy practices that she could use again in the future.

### Discussion Questions

**Have you and a student had different opinions regarding the success of an activity?**

◆

**How did you respond?**

### Identify a Class Structure Suitable for a Particular Text

Since the specificity of a text is so important, it might appear that individual work is the preferred way to go about using authentic texts. Indeed, it is often the case that a student has a specific text she wants to read. However, this does not mean that whole-class activities are not possible.

Many of the teachers in the study who used authentic materials begin by working with the whole class, and then move to individual work. Students in Anita's class, for example, were interested in writing letters. She began by discussing with the class the different types of letters that can be written (e.g., formal vs. informal letters), and what the expectations are for each type of letter. She explained, "If we are writing a formal letter, we talk about how would you complain about this, or what's one way to respond to [something that has happened]? We would talk about it, and write a group letter together." Many classes did send group letters to government officials or to the editorial section of local newspapers. In these cases, it is appropriate to have a group of people compose and sign a letter, as it presents a stronger case.

Students who are writing to members of their families or to friends should work on their own. These letters often contain personal information that students do not want revealed to the class. Teachers can work closely with students who are writing individual letters. This structure is also appropriate when students are looking for work since not all students are applying for the same type of jobs. Students will need to write cover letters and applications that are appropriate to the specific jobs they have in mind.

A single class period can include both group and individual work. In classes we observed, students often begin working together, and then move into more individualized work. Anita notes, "If one student wants to practice filling out a job application for a hospital, but others want to work in stores or in trucking or nursing, I need to find other applications that might more broadly apply to them in some way. Again, I usually try to find a choice of applications a student might choose from to complete."

How the text is used outside of the classroom should influence decisions about how to structure a class. Forcing the reading or writing of a text into a whole-class structure for the sake of convenience or teacher comfort can lead to disappointing results.

**◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: What are the benefits and drawbacks of each of these types of class structure?**

**Benefits** **Drawbacks**

one-on-one ______________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

pair work ________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

small group ______________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

whole class ______________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

## Be Ready for Unexpected Results

> *"Since I have been learning to read, now I can pick up my Bible and I can read scripture, and I don't have to stumble."*
>
> —Student participant in the LPALS

Teachers find that, in using authentic materials, students do not always follow expected directions or produce expected interpretations. Sometimes students take the real-world text and go in different directions than the teacher expected. For example, one teacher in the LPALS described a class project that involved students writing letters to their children's teachers. She conceptualized the lesson as part of an effort at advocacy training, and she expected that the students would try to get their questions about their children and their classes answered or would express their concerns about the school. It didn't work out that way. Instead, the students wrote letters apologizing for their children's behavior. The teacher noted, "Sometimes when we say write a letter to your child's teacher introducing yourself to the teacher, they — I don't know if it is the Hispanic culture — but they'll often apologize for their child, or say, 'If I can help my child behave better let me know.' They think that their job is discipline. It's not quite what we are trying to get them to express to the teacher, but it's also part of learning what it's like in America, and how parents play a different role here."

Teachers also cannot guarantee that actions will have the intended results. Students may take time to draft and send a letter to a newspaper or a politician, and get no response or not see their letter published. Teachers must anticipate that this is a possibility and be prepared to talk about why the students might not have gotten the results they wanted. They can also point out that this happens quite often in the world outside the classroom and so is part of the reality of literacy practice.

Several programs involved in our study also noted a problem when tutors were uncomfortable with the texts the student chose to work on. In each case it was around the issue of religion. Religious texts are popular with many students, and often their expressed goal is to be able to read the Bible. These students' reasons for attending adult literacy classes are at times grounded in their religious beliefs. In one center, a tutor stopped working with a student because their value systems were in conflict. Usually, however, the teacher finds a way to adapt. One of our data collectors noted: "The tutor points out that he worked with material that he really disliked, but it was material his student wanted to read, so they used it." The tutor concluded that the priority in this case was not expressing his own opinions about the text, but rather in helping the student read a text she had identified as playing an important role in her life.

### Account for Variations in Student Experience

When choosing to work with a given text, teachers must account for variations in student experience. Although they may be in the same adult literacy class, students do not necessarily use literacy in the same way in their lives outside of the classroom. For example, while some students might benefit greatly from a class that focuses on reading prescriptions and the labels of medicine bottles, some students in the class may be very comfortable already with this type of text. Or, while one student may be just beginning to understand a bus schedule, another will have mastered it, having used one for years. One teacher said, "I think what drives me crazy is using whole class instruction when you know the whole class doesn't need the instruction. I can't think of a worst waste of time."

*Discussion Questions*

**Are there any texts that students might want to use that would make you uncomfortable?**

Most texts, it's good to remember, can be approached in a variety of ways. For example, one teacher noted that while working with newspapers, students who are beginning to read can look at photographs and read the captions, while others can work with longer and more difficult passages. In classes where the difference in skill levels is not so drastic, it is also possible to look for layers of difficulty that are built into the text. While some students in one teacher's class were working on writing down their names and addresses on a job application, other students were discussing the use of "NA" for "not applicable." Individualized class work can be tailored to students' current needs. If working on a particular type of text is of little interest to some students, they can spend their time in class doing some other type of literacy practice that is related to the topic of the text. For example, employed students might grapple with completing an incident report from work, or use the time to write a work-related entry in their dialogue journal, rather than learn to master a job application.

Another approach is to recognize those students with more experience as resources. For example, Lisa explained that the length of time immigrant students have been in the United States varies. This variation allows Lisa to ask students who have been in the country a while to explain the topic under discussion to students who are newer. A student with more experience can help a newer one in learning to read a bus schedule, for example, or in identifying what words to look for on the front of the bus. Teachers should be careful when asking "higher" level students to help "lower" level students, however. Several students in our study noted that they felt they were always being used as resources, and that their own educational needs were not being met. Any activity has to be purposeful and beneficial to the more advanced students, as well as the beginners.

## ◆ POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ◆ Authentic texts can be found in the world of the students outside of the classroom, and teachers can use a variety of strategies for obtaining them.
- ◆ Authentic purposes for reading and writing texts need to reflect the students' real-life purposes as well as the teacher's pedagogical purposes.
- ◆ Teachers need to explain the reason for the use of authentic texts and activities in the classroom, especially when some students' are accustomed to a traditional view of what constitutes reading and writing in school.
- ◆ Authentic texts do not vary only by type but also according to region and context, justifying selecting texts from the actual worlds of the students rather than from generic collections of 'real-life' texts.

- Authentic texts can be difficult texts, and teachers need to discuss that reality with students.
- Keeping the purposes, or functions, for reading and writing authentic texts in the forefront ensures their authenticity.
- Assessment of success with authentic texts needs to be related to the authentic purposes for reading and writing them.
- Factors to consider when using authentic texts and activities include class structure, variability in student experience and ability, and variety of texts.
- Be prepared for unexpected results and be ready to follow up on them.

CHAPTER FOUR

# *Authentic Thematic Activities for the Classroom*

When attempting to bring more real-world texts and activities into adult literacy instruction, it is helpful to consider how other teachers have done the same. In this chapter, we provide several examples of thematic units that illustrate the use of real-life texts, read and written for real-life purposes, by adults in literacy classes. We also provide a few additional thematic ideas to use, if, of course, they correspond with students' needs, concerns, and desires.

Getting to know students enables teachers to tailor classroom instruction to address student interests and concerns. More often than not, students share common issues and experiences. For example, a number of students may have jobs that require specific kinds of reading or writing. Many students may also be parents who wish to read or write certain school- or pediatrician-related documents. Certain topics will arise periodically, depending upon current local and national events. Elections are an example.

## Building Themes for Reading and Writing

In general, expect to spend anywhere from several days to several weeks teaching a theme. The idea is to get immersed in a topic, and to explore the different literacy practices that can potentially be used in learning about that topic. For example, Barbara and Nancy found that their students were extremely interested in the 2000 presidential election. They decided to tap into their students' interests by spending several weeks on the theme. Students learned how to complete voter registration forms and how to fill in a ballot. They read issue statements from each of the candidates to be able to decide, issue by issue, which candidate they liked best. They wrote letters to the candidates, and they watched the debates and discussed them in class. One student, who had taken a particular interest in the elections, was asked to teach a class comparing and contrasting the two candidates and then lead a discussion about the election with his classmates. The students became so involved with the election that 100 percent of the class voted in November.

Adult students in a program called Operation Bootstrap, in Massachusetts, have taken the initiative to study breast cancer. Students in St. Charles, Virginia, became involved in an effort to counter what they saw as punitive changes in their state's food stamp policies. Groups of students in different parts of the country have used their classes as a place to organize for better public transportation. On the national level, the Equipped for the Future (EFF) initiative, led by the National Institute for Literacy (see Resources), attempts to provide a content framework for the types of skills all adult learners need in their different roles as parents, workers, and citizens. The EFF framework helps teachers connect their classrooms to skills needed in the outside world, frequently by connecting the classes themselves to the outside world. Many adult educators across the country now see the importance of bringing students' lives into classes as a way of providing meaningful instruction.

## Attending to Literacy Needs of Students

A theme must build on interest among students so that learning becomes interesting and relevant for them. However, building interest alone is not sufficient. Theme teaching must also address the literacy needs of students. The students in Barbara and Nancy's class were not just learning about a topic that interested them, they were also learning how to read for information, how to fill out forms, how to summarize what they read, and how to compare and contrast. All these are literacy practices that will be useful to them in all their literacy pursuits.

Word-level skills can also be attended to in the context of reading and writing real-life texts for authentic purposes. Sound-symbol relationships, syllabification, spelling, prefixes and suffixes: the need for instruction in all of these will undoubtedly arise for ABE students when they encounter texts intended to be read and written by fully literate adults. Teachers can prepare lists of words that are giving their students problems in the texts they are reading, and conduct class lessons on decoding and encoding skills that will allow them to be read or spelled. Lessons on punctuation and capitalization will often accompany the filling out of forms or the writing of letters.

As we noted in Chapter One, many studies have documented, and countless teachers and students have attested to, the power of learning skills in the context of actual reading and writing for authentic purposes. The key here is *in the context of.* This stands in contrast to teaching skills separate from the actual use of them. Often times, teachers who follow this latter approach believe that their students must first master word-level skills before they can read and write any type of real-life text for real purposes. While this may make intuitive sense to many, the separate teaching of skills doesn't work as efficiently or as powerfully (as measured by the degree to which students remember and apply the skills) as when these skills are learned in authentic contexts.

## ◆ SAMPLE THEMES FOR ADULT LITERACY INSTRUCTION

After deciding upon a theme with students, brainstorm the possible literacy practices that could be associated with that theme. What kinds of reading and writing will students need to do? The following sample themes demonstrate the wide variety of literacy activities that can be used when exploring a single theme.

## ◆ THEME ONE: HOUSEHOLD TASKS

Talking about food is a staple of many adult education classrooms. Since eating and cooking are generally tension-free subjects, students and teachers often break the ice by discussing their experiences or preferences when it comes to food. While it is useful for this purpose, shopping and cooking as a subject does not have to be limited to "fun" times in class. For many students, cooking is an important household activity, and one that already involves literacy in multiple ways. Indeed, many students in the LPALS expressed a need to work on just this kind of literacy. One student explained what it was that she needed to study: "Grocery lists. I didn't know how to do my grocery lists, I had my kids do it for me."

Others pointed to dietary issues that were of vital concern to them. For example, a student noted, "I always have to read the labels on everything that I buy. I have to watch the salt and sodium. And, especially because some of the foods also have iodine in it and I'm allergic to iodine. And the salt and sodium I can't take because of my heart."

Students also noted that some of the strategies that had served them well in the past did not work well in their new surroundings. For example, this student described what caused them to change their use of literacy in the supermarket: "Up here it's a lot different than home – the flour don't look the same....I picked up, one time, I picked up flour for sugar. It was the same color and everything. Got home and it was flour. So I started penning down a little bit more." Indeed, the impetus to begin our study occurred when one of the researchers was working with a young mother of two at a university-based clinic. This mother, feeling frustrated with the types of learning materials she was getting in her adult literacy class exclaimed, *"Why can't they teach me words that I need?! Like potatoes or corn!"*

As we pointed out earlier, authentic materials do not have to be revolutionary in nature. Their value and strength is in helping students to engage in new literacy practices within their day-to-day lives. What may seem like a small change to an outsider may mean a lot to the student. For example, one student described how his life changed because of new literacy practices he mastered: "I looked at the paper, and I didn't know what I was to do. But now I know how to read the paper. I know how to look in the newspaper and pick out different coupons, different things to do for the best buy, where you get the best bargain at, and the best place to get it. I know how to do that now."

One way to organize many of these household related literacy skills is for the students to prepare a meal or food dish in class. Of course, this should not be an activity chosen by the teacher but could be offered as a possibility for students to consider, since it may never cross students' minds as a possibility. Below is a suggestion of one way of conducting a cooking project in class. The project can be broken down into six steps, each with its own required literacy activity or activities.

*Choosing a meal*
*Creating a recipe*
*Writing up a shopping list*
*Doing the shopping*
*Preparing the food*
*Serving/eating the food*

### Choosing a Meal

Students in classes that decide to do some cooking must determine what it is that they want to cook. The easiest way to do this is by brainstorming: students give suggestions and the teacher or a student writes these ideas on the board. When finished giving suggestions, the class can vote for their preference. While writing down options, teachers can focus on spelling, eliciting suggestions and providing explicit feedback and instruction.

### Creating a Recipe

After deciding on the meal, the class must decide upon recipes for the component foods that make up the meal. If cookbook(s) are consulted, recipes can be photocopied and distributed to the each person in the class.

Students may also have their own recipes in mind for foods that they have learned to prepare without written directions. This is a perfect opportunity to share with the class one of the purposes of written language:

to convey ideas across space and time when it is not possible to be there in person. These types of recipes can then be written down and copied for class members. At this juncture, explicit explanation on how to write recipes, perhaps generalizing to other procedural texts, is appropriate. Some of the features to explain and model include the materials section, the steps listed in order, demonstrative illustrations, and so on. Word-level skills for spelling and punctuation will also be addressed in the process of writing the recipes. If appropriate to the skill level of the students, some common food and cooking terms (e.g. *mix, stir, preheat, measure, pour, beat*) could be pulled out and placed in a spelling list. These words can be revisited at each stage of the project and mastery expected by a certain date.

Because some students, or teachers, may be on restricted diets for religious or health reasons, it is important to take the time to really discuss what the ingredients of the food will be. Students may be interested in looking into the nature of diets as part of this process, and this would be a good way to integrate some longer readings.

### Creating a Shopping List

After the recipes have been chosen and created, a shopping trip to purchase ingredients is often necessary. Before heading out, students should consult the recipe to make their shopping lists. Some schools may already have some of the ingredients, so students can check in the kitchen and check those items off of the list.

Some of the words on the list may be new if students are learning English. This is an excellent opportunity for vocabulary development as they look for and identify new food ingredients or known ones with new names. Practice with English pronunciation is also natural.

### Doing the Shopping

Getting the shopping done can either be quick ("Let's go to the store") or can take more time ("Let's look to see if we can save some money"). Strategies for saving money involve students in reading newspapers and flyers for coupons and specials. Teachers can model ways to: read flyers and coupons, locate the prices, note the sizes or amounts being sold at that price, and comparison shop. Also, new terms and abbreviations will need direct, explicit instruction in word-level decoding skills.

Shopping for ingredients can be done as a whole group or individually. If students go as a group, teachers can point out the ways in which print is used in the stores as locator signs and as labels with pricing. Explicit instruction in word identification and pricing conventions is called for in these instances for those who need it.

### Preparing the Food

Once the food has been purchased, it is time to prepare the meal. Even while engaged in cooking itself, literacy is involved. Students must follow the directions of the recipe and read information on any food packaging. This includes reading quantity and not all students will be familiar with American standard measures and their abbreviations, such as *Tablespoon (tbs), Teaspoon (tsp),* or *Cup (C).* Special cooking terms such as *beat, whip,* and *fold* will need to be introduced and followed. Thus, the word-level teaching and learning that took place when creating the recipes (see above) can be assessed in process.

This stage also provides an opportunity to talk about the function of procedural texts such as recipes. The function of a recipe is to provide enough information and explanation about the procedure of preparing and cooking the food so that someone who is not there watching someone else do it can do it appropriately. The specificity of recipes, how much prior knowledge of cooking, and how much improvisation is appropriate can be topics of discussion.

### Serving and Eating

Once the food is ready to be eaten, there are many possible ways to proceed. Students may invite other students to come to share the food, or they may cook the food for others outside of school (e.g., a homeless shelter or soup kitchen). In these cases, invitations will be written, dishes may be labeled, and menus written. Notes can be attached to the dishes, perhaps explaining their origin or relating simple narratives around the dish from the life of the originating class member. All of these activities surrounding the serving and eating of the food involve reading and writing. As such, each reading and writing event would have embedded in it direct and explicit instruction on form, spelling, punctuation, and so on.

## ◆ POSSIBLE EXTENSIONS OF THE COOKING ACTIVITY

Once a class has decided on and completed a cooking project, there are many ways to expand upon or extend the lesson. Below are three suggestions.

Students can write a response to the project. This could be included as part of an already ongoing dialogue journal, or as a separate text.

Students can engage in a research project that is related to food or cooking. For example, students can investigate health issues and think about their current eating habits. It would take several classes to cover some basics about topics like cholesterol, fat, or sugar. Students could also research social aspects of food and cooking. Many students would probably be interested in finding out more about how migrant or immigrant labor is used in the production of strawberries or sugar. Class time can be set aside for discussion of global issues, such as how the price of coffee in America is related to the conditions of coffee harvesters in Central America.

Students can put together a class cookbook. They can write an accompanying text that provides reasons for the inclusion of each recipe. Some classes create cookbooks as a way to raise funds for the class. Students can also see direct links between cooking and literacy when they are putting together such a book.

## ◆ FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR HOUSEHOLD RELATED PROJECTS

In addition to cooking, many other household tasks could become the basis for work in class. Following are two such suggestions.

### Making Large Purchases

Students often find themselves having to purchases major items such as household appliances, cars, or even houses. As we found in our study, many students do not have experience working with texts such as leases or applications for loans. To make wise choices, students need to have all of the facts on hand and to truly understand their choices. Like cooking, this is a multi-step process. Students begin with a large focus (say, buying a car) and then narrow their scope by looking for the answers to key questions: What kind of car do I need? What are the benefits to buying a used car? What would leasing a car involve? What are the drawbacks?

As part of this process, students also must learn where they can locate information. Books, such as car buying guides, are one resource, as is the Internet. Students must also be able to assess the validity of the information they locate, and be able to process a wide variety of information.

In this process, written language will be used in a number of ways: writing down ideas and responses, reading guides, listing features of cars felt to be required or desired, filling out application forms for loans or leases, and so on. All of this will require direct and explicit information and explanation. In addition, word-level reading and writing skills can be taught in the process of learning and following up on the research needed to make informed large purchases.

### Household Cleaning

The connection of cleaning and literacy is one that is related to health. Many products that are used around the home have chemicals in them that have potential negative side effects on the health of those who use them. This is especially true for those who are in constant contact with these products, like housekeepers, for example. A class project on cleaning could begin by creating a list of all the products that students use in cleaning. Those products could be brought into class, and students could work together to do close readings of the labels. With the teacher's help, they can learn to recognize labeling conventions (e.g. the proportion of ingredients is often apparent from their order of listing), and other labeling customs.

From these close readings, students can research the effects of these chemicals on people, which precautions users need to follow, and antidote information and procedures. They can also research alternatives to the products. (See bibliography for health-related materials.) By progressing through a multistage process, students will be using written language in a variety of ways. They will be writing notes while brainstorming; reading labels and informational text; writing memos and short reports from this reading; and perhaps writing letters protesting the use of certain materials to such audiences as newspapers, the Board of Health, and various federal and state agencies with regulatory powers over household cleaners.

## ◆ WHAT MAKES THESE ACTIVITIES AUTHENTIC?

The reading and writing activities suggested in these examples centering around Household Tasks are 'authentic', or 'real-world' because they involve real-world texts and real-world reasons, or purposes, for reading and writing those texts. Again, it is the purpose the student has for reading and writing the text that makes them authentic. The teacher has other purposes, included in which are the 'school-only' activities that the teacher provides that will help her students gain the print-related skills necessary to develop into effective, critical, and fluent readers. These skills, though, are taught and learned in the context of and during the process of authentic reading and writing of authentic texts in the lives of these adult students.

| AUTHENTIC TEXTS | AUTHENTIC PURPOSES FOR READING/WRITING |
|---|---|
| Lists | To keep track of options; to remember items to buy |
| Recipes | To prepare food |
| Menus | To present food choices; to choose what to eat |
| Food Labels | To discover ingredients for health/religious purposes |
| Grocery Store Labels | To locate desired items in store; to learn prices |
| Invitations | To invite guests to an event |
| Coupons | To discover price of item; to comparison shop |
| Flyers | To discover price of item; to comparison shop |
| Narratives | To tell a story in writing |
| Journals | To record personal responses, thoughts, questions |
| Informational Texts | To learn new information |
| Buying guides | To inform purchasing decisions |
| Internet Text | To inform purchasing decisions |
| Forms | To apply for and gain approval for a loan of money |
| Cleanser Labels | To discover ingredients for health reasons |
| Letters | To protest an unsafe condition to those in power |

## ◆ THEME TWO: PARENTING AND FAMILY

### Example: Tracking a Child's Progress at School

> *"When I asked my son what the F's on his report card stood for, he told me 'Fantastic'. I had no idea that my son was failing until the end of the year, when the teacher told me he would have to be held back."*
>
> —Student participant in the LPALS

The birth of a child or a child beginning school are two life events that often motivate parents to enroll in a literacy program, be it a family literacy or adult literacy program. Many students in literacy classes who are also parents want to improve their literacy skills in order to navigate the many literacy tasks that are inherent in child rearing: from reading food labels, to reading information from their children's schools, to being able to communicate effectively with pediatricians.

One suggestion for involving students in some of the literacy tasks of parenting is to devote class time to learning about school assessment procedures. As the quote above demonstrates, parents, especially those who come from other countries, do not always know how to make sense of their children's report cards. They may also have difficulty understanding standardized test results or reading letters from teachers and school flyers. Such parents are sometimes perceived by teachers as being disinterested in their child's progress or unwilling to get involved. The truth is, most parents care deeply about their children's education. Spending class time on these issues can have important consequences for students as well as for their children.

The following are suggested activities for helping students keep track of their children's progress in school:

*Understanding the information in school newsletters or flyers*
*Making sense of report cards and other progress reports*
*Making the most of parent/teacher conferences*
*Communicating with teachers*
*Learning about standardized tests and what they say about a child's progress in school*

### Understanding the Information in School Newsletters or Flyers

From the very beginning of the school year, encourage students to keep watch for any school communication that their children bring home. Bring some sample items into class to alert parents to what a school newsletter or a notice from the principal could look like. Point out that letters from teachers and principals often look more like flyers than letters: they are not usually folded into an envelope.

Encourage students to bring any such items into class, especially if they are having difficulty reading and understanding them. If at least one parent is willing to bring a letter or a memo to parents in to the class and that others are similarly interested, develop some literacy lessons around this.

Lessons focusing on written communication between schools and parents can begin with group consideration of a typical letter home from the teacher or principal. Putting a copy on an overhead while providing each student with his or her own copy enables teachers to point out specific parts and phrases while discussing the contents. Explicit explanation of the form is helpful. For example, the following aspects of letters can be pointed out: 1) the date at the top; 2)the form of address (Dear Parent means it is going to every parent; Dear Mrs. XXXX means that it is for specific parents, and so on); 3)the headings (help the reader identify what type of information is being provided); 4) lists of required materials (such as for a field trip); 5) the location of contact information.

Explanation of these written communications should not be just one-way information sessions. Students will want to share stories and strategies for communicating with school personnel. Individuals may very well have identified how to "read" school communication in ways that allow them to understand the school's perceptions and attitudes toward their children and their families. These discussions can lead to critically engaging discussions and further literacy practices, such as reading the reports from school board meetings or writing letters to school board members, principals, supervisors, and others.

Other, more fundamental literacy needs do not have to be abandoned as the class learns and shares about the written texts that schools send to parents. Sound/symbol relationships and syllabification rules can inform study of words like *conference* and *examination*; spelling lists can be formed from commonly used terms like *attention, field trip, required, materials,* and *sincerely*. Discussion vocabulary in terms of their explicit and implicit meanings will ensure that this skill work is embedded in the lives of the students.

Using school flyers as literacy texts in the adult literacy classroom offers teachers a way to help their students keep current on happenings at their children's school, while also providing real-life texts that can be used to improve students' reading skills.

## Making Sense of Report Cards and Other Progress Reports

Reading school flyers in class often alerts teachers as to when report cards are scheduled to come out. When they arrive, spend some class time helping parents figure out exactly what kind of information a report card is attempting to convey. Approach local school districts for a copy of the blank report card: schools often use different forms for different grades, and students may have children in a number of districts, so this may entail quite a field trip

In general, a report card is mean to provide information, though its information is not conveyed in the same way that information in a newsletter is conveyed. It is rarely narrative in nature, and can be quite complicated, with many boxes and abbreviations and specialized vocabulary. Because a large amount of information is being conveyed in a relatively small amount of space, the items being evaluated are not always spelled out clearly. Being able to read the words on a report card and understanding what they mean are not one and the same. For example, parents may not understand that "knows operations" on a math report card is really assessing whether or not students know their basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, and/or division facts.

By providing photocopies of blank report cards before their children receive their report cards, and using them as a teaching tool, teachers help students learn to recognize and interpret specialized vocabulary used on report cards. The interpretation is particularly important, as it helps alert parents to grades or comments that signal that a parent should be concerned

When students receive their children's actual report cards, ask if any of them would be willing to bring them into class. After practicing with blank report cards, teachers need to insure that parents can apply their knowledge. Are they able to read the report card and then summarize their child's progress? Are they able to pinpoint their child's strengths and weaknesses?

Teachers can work word-level decoding and spelling skills into the class discussions and lessons on the vocabulary of report cards. Further, if parents wish to write letters to teachers or principals regarding their concern about aspects of the reporting procedure or their children's actual grades, explicit instruction in letter writing, forms of address and signature, and specific spellings will also be appropriate.

### Making the Most of Parent/Teacher Conferences

When parents are unclear about the assessment procedures used at their children's schools, conference time can often be very confusing and unproductive. In addition, they may not always be sure when conferences are, particularly if they are not in the habit of reading the information their children bring home from school

Parents can be better prepared for conferences if they know what to expect. Common questions of parents new to the school system are: How much time will be allotted for conferences? How are they generally structured? Should I bring my child? The more prepared parents are for conferences, the more likely they are to play an active role in them.

One way to help ensure their active role in conferences is by helping parents to use the information from the report card to prepare. Report cards can be used to guide parents in thinking of questions they wish to ask the teacher about their child's progress. For example, "Why did Juan's grade in reading drop from a B to a C?" or "I see that Kyana needs improvement in math problem solving—What can I do at home to help?" This brainstorming could lead to writing activities, such as writing down questions to ask teachers at conferences, or writing down information to convey to teachers that the parents believe will inform children's learning in school.

Some parents may be nervous about participating actively in school conferences. Role plays and discussion about expectations of parents by school personnel are useful. Parents who feel that they are successful at participating in school can serve as good resources for discussion and exploration of the social consequences, as well as the educational benefit to the child, of active participation in school conferences. Also useful are teachers who may be willing to share with parents the value that teachers see in such participation. If a class were to agree to invite a teacher to talk with them, a written invitation could be composed by the group and sent to the teacher.

### Helping Students Improve Communication with their Children's Teachers

Communication with elementary and secondary school teachers need not come only during conference time. Parents should feel that communication with teachers is valued and important to continue throughout the school year. One way to reinforce this idea is to guide students through this process. For example, ask students what they might like to be able to communicate to the teacher. As different parents respond, take note of the different types of texts that would be required for the different purposes. Some parents may like to write a note informing the teacher of when their child will be absent. Others may like to write a note informing the teacher of when their children would like to bring treats to the class to celebrate their birthdays. Some may want to let the teacher know that they'd like to join the class on a field trip. Notes that request an action on the teacher's part or a response may also be on their lists. For example, academic concerns may prompt a written message that conveys, "My child does not understand the homework and I can't help him." Interactional messages are also common between parents and teachers. These can thank teachers for something or simply wish them well at the end of the year.

All of these needs can provide the basis for specific literacy lessons on letter and note writing. Teachers can demonstrate different forms of texts on the list, as well as the variety of specific vocabularies that convey different tones. To ensure the authenticity of these lessons, students need to write real notes or letters and send them to their children's teachers. Spelling and other word-level skills can be addressed as students are composing their letters.

### Learning about Standardized Tests

With the current nationwide emphasis on standardized tests to track the progress of our nation's schoolchildren, it is inevitable that students' children will take some kind of standardized assessment. Parents often have no idea what these tests entail, and they are also often confused by the reports of the results.

To help parents develop a better understanding of standardized tests, try to address this topic *before* the children take them. One effective way to begin such a focus is to collect articles about the tests from the newspaper or from the school district to read and discuss in class. Reading to learn about tests will involve students in strategies for gaining information from print. It will also help parents to become better informed about what tests are actually testing, how they can best help their children prepare for tests, and the consequences of doing very well or very poorly. Many school districts now pass or retain students on the basis of a standardized test score, and parents need to understand this.

While providing guided reading experiences of such texts, be explicit about the strategies that are helpful. These include getting the main idea, using headings, distinguishing between fact and opinion, and identifying information that will have personal consequences for them as parents. Critical reading skills are also important around such issues. Students need to know that language can be used to hide or distort information to the benefit of someone else. The result can be important discussions on the use of language to create an impression and to shape the thinking of the reader. Within this framework, new vocabulary can be taught, and new spelling and decoding skills can be learned and applied.

After test results are provided to parents, literacy lessons can center on the reading and interpreting of these reports. Again, a generic report, with fictional scores, can be used for whole group discussion and explanation. Parents may bring to class their own children's test scores if they are comfortable receiving specific guidance in reading them. As with report cards, standardized test results are usually reported graphically, using specialized vocabulary. Valuable literacy instruction can be provided around reading the graphs and understanding the concepts behind norm-referenced terms such as stanine or percentile (see Chapter Five for a discussion of such terms). Further, parents will benefit from understanding the relationship between their children's scores and terms such as below average, average, and above average.

As teachers help students learn and critically grasp the concepts behind terms like *stanine, percentile, average, below average,* they can learn to decode, spell, and use these terms for themselves. For example, *percentile* has three syllables, and the last one *–ile* indicates that the word is not the same as *percent* or *percentage,* but rather relates to part of a distribution of scores. Discussion of what this means in relation to their children's scores will inextricably intertwine the concept, the critical understanding of that concept, and the spelling for the student. In such a way, skills are powerfully learned in real-life contexts.

## ◆ FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR THEMATICALLY RELATED PROJECTS

### Children's Health and Safety

One universal concern of parents is their children's physical development and health. These topics are associated with a range of texts and purposes for reading and writing. Health articles or brochures that list the types of foods and nutrients that are essential for children's growth and health are available on-line, in newspapers, and at health centers. Also available are informational texts, either as parts of books or as public health brochures, that give parents guidelines as to when to call the pediatrician, when to take their children to the emergency room, and so on. Similar texts are available on such topics as age-appropriate toys and activities and how to make the home safe for children.

Whole group, small group, and individual reading activities can emanate from students' interests in these issues. They can read to answer their own question and to provide answers for others. Writing activities may result in creating brochures for other parents in the class or school, or in letters sent to hospital or clinic personnel requesting answers to questions raised during reading or discussion.

As for all of the other activities suggested here, specific reading, writing, spelling, and composition skills will need to be explicitly attended to by the teacher in the process of this authentic reading and writing.

### Reading with Children

Many students in adult literacy or family literacy programs are convinced of the value of reading to their children. One common goal is to learn to do this. Teachers whose students have this as a goal can center literacy instruction on ways to identify and match books with their children's interests. Explicit instruction on locating and using a children's library has proven to be quite valuable. Also, teachers can provide class time for parents to practice reading the children's books they have selected. Adult students often polish their own reading skills in the interest of reading to their children. Many teachers have found that listening to taped versions of children's books helps adults develop fluency and expression in an enjoyable and nonthreatening way.

### Behavior/Discipline

Literacy instruction can play a role in parenting classes and in lessons that focus on effective ways to shape children's behavior, a common focus of many family literacy programs. Texts can be found on this topic, some of them directed at parents. The most effective of these will center on providing information and strategies for parents to try. These texts can be found in parenting books, in child rearing advice columns in magazines and newspapers, and in brochures published by state and local family services as well as pediatricians.

These texts can form the basis for candid discussions among your students, discussions that include issues of cultural difference in child rearing, personal experiences and beliefs. Teachers can contribute to the literacy development of their students by helping them learn to locate information in important texts, by giving students a chance to articulate the differences between facts and opinion, and by supporting students' learning of the decoding skills needed to read the print. Writing activities may involve personal responses in journals, opinion pieces that are published in a class book or presented orally, a class-based advice column, and so on.

## ◆ WHAT MAKES THESE ACTIVITIES AUTHENTIC?

The suggested reading and writing activities within this theme on Parenting and Family are authentic in that they involve texts and purposes for reading and writing those texts occur in the world outside of schools. Again, it is the purpose the student has for reading and writing the text that makes them authentic. The teacher has other purposes, including literacy learning and teaching. Included in these teacher purposes are the 'school-only' activities that the teacher provides that will help her students gain the print-related skills necessary to develop into effective, critical, and fluent readers. These skills, though, are taught and learned in the context of and during the process of authentic reading and writing of authentic texts in the lives of these adult students

| AUTHENTIC TEXTS | AUTHENTIC PURPOSES FOR READING/WRITING |
|---|---|
| School Memos & Flyers | To gain information from school personnel |
| Letters | To engage officials in issues considered important |
| Reports | To learn about standards and positions taken by officials |
| Report Cards | To learn about children's progress in school |
| Lists of Questions | To prepare for school conferences |
| Invitations | To invite a class speaker |
| Note to Teacher | To inform teacher of absence, request help for child, or other items of interest |
| Newspaper Articles | To learn about topics such as testing, parenting, etc. |
| Informational Articles from School Districts | To learn about topics such as testing to help children prepare, and to understand and critique such testing |
| Reports of Test Results | To learn about child's scores and performance |
| Magazine Health Article | To learn about good nutrition for child |
| Health Brochures | To learn about good nutrition for child; to learn about suggested parenting strategies |
| Children's Books | To read to children for enjoyment and educational benefits |
| Childrearing Advice Columns | To learn about effective parenting and to compare parenting styles |

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## ◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: Designing A Themed Activity

***Think of activities and materials in which students have expressed an interest. How can they be built into a themed unit?***

Theme: ____________________

Stages: ____________________

| | |
|---|---|
| Texts ____________ | Purposes ____________ |

CHAPTER FIVE

# Assessment

> *"We really have done a paradigm shift in terms of ourselves as co-assessors when we're sitting with the learners, not assessors. They know as much as we know about what they need to know. So we bring a certain expertise with us...and so do they. Our listening is [an important part of assessment]...it's about hearing how they're naming what they need to know."*
>
> —Barbara, adult literacy instructor in LPALS

Assessment of students is always a challenging issue for teachers. Teachers who utilize authentic materials and activities should strive to be consistent when it comes to assessment, and use holistic measures that capture the growth in students' real life uses of literacy. If a student's starting goal, for example, was to pass the beautician licensing exam so that she could get a better paying job at an established salon, then a learner-contextualized assessment of that goal would be to assess how much progress she made toward passing. Did she improve her score on practice tests? How many new vocabulary words did she learn? Did she pass? The goal of passing the licensing exam is a very personal, individualized goal for a student, and, of course, other students' goals are different. Learner-contextualized assessment looks at students' real-life goals for literacy, and whether or not they are able to make progress in attaining those goals.

External pressure is often applied, either by program administrators or funders, even by students themselves, to use standardized tests to measure student growth. Test scores are often used by funders to measure how much progress students have made and, in turn, to determine if the literacy program itself is really helping students become better readers and writers. Because of this, some teachers feel a tremendous pressure to increase the scores of their students, even it if means sacrificing, to some degree, the contextualized nature of their curriculum (Elish-Piper, 2000).

Standardized, norm-referenced tests certainly have their value, but they cannot measure how much reading and writing students are doing outside of their class, or how much progress students have made toward reaching their personal literacy goals. Standardized, norm-referenced tests are designed to assess the general literacy ability of students relative to a national norm; they cannot possibly provide an individual portrait of a student's progress.

In this chapter, we look at how teachers who attempt to keep their classes contextualized in the lives of their students deal with the issue of assessment. In addition, we provide an overview of standardized assessments with the goal of explaining what they are and what they are not, and how they can be used most effectively in adult literacy classrooms.

## ◆ GETTING STARTED WITH LEARNER-CONTEXTUALIZED ASSESSMENT

### Initial Assessment of Student Ability

Most programs administer a placement test as well as conduct some type of intake interview in order to place students in classes. Depending on the literacy ability of the incoming student, the placement test is generally some version of a standardized, norm-referenced test. Many of the teachers that participated in the LPALS do not place a lot of faith in the results of these placement tests. Sometimes students who are placed in their classes have literacy levels far beyond the scope of the class; sometimes the student and the class are not a good match, for example, an ESOL student is sent to a beginning literacy, non-ESOL class.

Some teachers deal with the frequent inaccuracy of standardized, norm-referenced placement tests by following them up with a personal interview with new students. These interviews generally consist of an informal assessment, created by the teacher, of student ability. This may include asking students about what they already read and write, and how they feel about reading and writing. These informal assessments give teachers a more accurate sense of what students can and cannot do.

### Student Goals

Teachers in the LPALS who value learner-contextualized instruction report working with students to set specific goals for their literacy work during intake. They continue this procedure intermittently throughout a student's enrollment in class, reviewing and revising goals. Student goals are often initially quite vague. For example, students may say, "I want to read better" or "I want to spell better." Teachers then help students who provide such global literacy goals to think of what specifically will help them to become better readers or writers.

Sometimes, helping a student to pinpoint specific goals gives teachers a better sense of the skill level of the incoming student. After much back and forth, for example, a student may say that what he really needs to work on is vowel sounds, or that he just needs help putting the sounds of words together. This signals that the learner is probably a beginning reader. On the other hand, if a student believes that being a better writer will mean understanding how to use spreadsheet software on the computer, this may be a different level of literacy student. Initial goal setting is another step in deciding the proper placement for a student.

Having set academic goals, teachers interested in using contextualized instruction help students set goals that relate their academic goals to real-life activities. For example, a student who has an academic goal of learning the vowel sounds needs a real-life goal that can "showcase" this newly learned skill. Reading aloud a storybook to his children might be an appropriate goal. A real-life goal associated with learning proper punctuation might be writing a letter to a relative or friend.

Students should make the connection between working on discrete skills and the real-life activities that use those skills. Reviewing a list of

### *Discussion Questions*

**How accurate have you found placement tests to be in terms of evaluating the reading and writing abilities of your incoming students?**

◆

**How have you modified (or how would you like to modify) your program's intake process to better assess your incoming students?**

goals, both academic and real-life, is a wonderful way to assess student progress, because it provides students with a concrete way of evaluating how far they have come. Goals, of course, must be manageable. If a student's goal is to create a website, for example, a teacher's role is to help the student to create a list of intermediary goals that will act as steps toward achieving the ultimate goal. To be able to mark progress at reasonable intervals, goals should not be distant dreams, but realistic, manageable tasks.

*Discussion Questions*

**Do you know your students' goals for your class? If so, what do you do to learn about their goals? If not, what can you do to find out about them?**

◆

**How might knowing your students' goals for themselves change the way you assess your students?**

## ◆ ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS

Teachers can use a variety of informal assessments to provide a more learner-contextualized assessment of their students. Following are some of the methods used by the teachers we spoke to about authentic materials and activities.

### Portfolio Assessment

It is difficult to provide a simple definition of portfolio assessment, since teachers use portfolios in a variety of ways. In general, a portfolio is a folder or a box in which students store significant pieces of class work. Students are often in charge of deciding what work should be included in the portfolio, though teachers may require students to put specific pieces into the portfolio as well.

In Barbara and Nancy's class, portfolios provide a place for students to collect pieces that they believe mark their progress in the program. For example, if a student reads a book from cover to cover for the first time, he might take a picture of that book and put the picture in his portfolio. Students may put in their portfolios pieces of writing they have done, photocopies of articles they have read, or any other reading they might have done that held significance to them. They may include a letter they received in the portfolio. Any and all items or events that students believe are noteworthy and that reflect their progress may be put into or represented in the portfolio.

Barbara and Nancy's students go through their portfolios periodically to reflect on their work and evaluate their progress. Though Barbara and Nancy are also interested in their students' portfolios and what their collected work reveals about their progress, they firmly believe that students must learn to assess their own work. As Barbara said, "The authority to assess really comes from what you think about what you did...so [students acquire the] ability to start evaluating based on what's in that folder. '*Oh, I did learn how to do that. I probably should read more articles...*'" Barbara's goal is to shift the authority from the teacher as the one who assesses student progress to the student who assesses his own progress. She sees portfolios as a way of putting students in control of their own assessment.

Lisa, the family literacy teacher, believes that sometimes students find it easier to track their progress based on test scores or skills checklists, but she also uses portfolios in her class to help students reflect on their progress. She noted that by keeping student work in one place over time, it is easy for students to see how much they have progressed. For example, she asks students to do a writing sample on a given topic, and then, three months later she has them do another writing sample on the same topic.

### ◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: How do you envision using portfolios in your class?

List different items that your students could keep in portfolios and how those items could aid in student assessment.

| Item | Role in Assessment |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

Both of these pieces of writing are kept in the portfolio. When students look at both pieces, improvement in writing is often evident. They are able to note changes in spelling, grammar, and content quite easily by comparing the two pieces side-by-side.

According to Lisa, tests are often given, then filed away, out of sight. A portfolio, on the other hand, is an always-accessible gauge of student progress. Regarding the process of student self-reflection, Lisa said, "Every so often we try to do a 'where have we been and where are we going?' kind of a meta-class. They look through their work and they see, *'Wow, look where I was when I first got here and look how far I've come. This is what I've learned, and this is what I still want to learn.'"*

### Student Self-Report

> *"Long before, I was always thinking I couldn't do anything and ever since I've learned how to read, it's like, I've gotten stronger. You know, stronger woman; I've learned how to, like poems, you know I've read poems by Maya, Maya Angelou…*Phenomenal Woman, Still I Rise. *[Our teacher] had us writing something, and I got to put all those together—all those words, you know, together as a poem. It made me stronger to read; I could write, I, I don't know, I feel super woman, you know I could read a lot, and it's good. It's good."*
>
> —Student participant in LPALS

Since the ultimate goal of adult literacy classes is to increase the amount of reading and writing that students do *outside of class,* teachers should learn from students about what they read and write when they're not in class. One teacher in Massachusetts gives students time in class each week to reflect upon and then record in a "literacy log" any reading and writing that they did in the previous week. Because students have the class time to reflect on and write about their out-of-class reading and writing, they can really see how their lives are changing because of their newly acquired literacy skills. Teachers can also use these literacy logs to assess student progress. What are students doing now with written texts that they did not report doing when they first started the class? What kinds of things are they still not doing?

Another reason for asking students to write about their out-of-school reading and writing is that it provides documentation of student progress. Collecting this kind of data helps when talking to funders. Nancy told us, "We keep trying to educate our funders [that] a goal of reading at the eighth grade level is not realistic...we have documentation that our students self-reported that they read their own mail, they're writing checks, they are reading a book outside of class. They're helping their kids with their homework; they're self reporting this... so therefore, it's not a standardized test measurement, but it's something that can impact... the quality of their lives."

Many teachers from our study also provide class time for students to talk about their progress. They believe in allowing students to celebrate their progress and to learn about the progress of others in class. This time also allows teachers to note the successes of their students. Though students may take pride in their progress on more formal assessments such as standardized tests, Nancy noted that during this class time, students rarely report about their progress on standardized tests: "Hey, guess what? My score went up three points!" They talk instead about what they are now able to do that they were unable to do before, such as spell all the number words correctly when writing checks, read a story aloud to a child, or read the Bible for the first time. This is class time well spent. One student from our study reflected, "You know, I'm real proud of what I did this semester, this time. My arms are kind of old, so I can't pat myself on the back, so I'll pat myself on the chest." It is moments like these that show teachers and students alike what an impact the class has had.

## ◆ OTHER FORMS OF LEARNER-CONTEXTUALIZED ASSESSMENT

In addition to the aforementioned forms of assessment, the following can also provide useful information about student progress:

### Teacher Observations

Whether they are aware of it or not, teachers spend a lot of time informally assessing students' progress. When introducing a new concept, teachers may notice that one student has trouble understanding; or teachers realize as they read through their journals that students need to review some grammar skills. In listening to a class book discussion, teachers may note that a student is demonstrating for the first time that he can think analytically about literature. These informal observations provide a great deal of pertinent information about students and should not be undervalued as assessment tools.

It can be helpful to keep notes of this informal assessment, creating a record of observations of what students are learning and what they seem to be missing. This documentation is helpful for lesson planning; it's also useful when reporting to funders and supervisors. These observations can be shared with students as well.

### Conferences

Conferencing with individual students is another form of learner-contextualized assessment. Formal conferences can be held perhaps once or twice a term, outside of class time. They can also take place more informally, during class time, as the need arises. A conference is a good time to review students' goals to see what progress has been made toward achieving them. Teachers may be unaware of progress students have made, or may see progress where students do not. Conferences are an ideal setting for mutual input: together, teachers and students can get a better picture of student progress.

Conference time is also a good time in which to reevaluate student goals. Maybe a student's goals have changed, or the teacher has devised intermediary goals that may chart a more productive path toward achieving ultimate objectives. The observations and informal assessments teachers have made of each student can also be discussed during conferences. Teachers can describe what the students have done well and what areas they still need to work on. Conference time can be used to review portfolios jointly.

*Discussion Questions*

**Think about the kinds of assessment discussed in this section. Choose one form of assessment that you don't currently use in your class.**

◆

**How could you incorporate that assessment into your instructional program? How would you introduce it to students?**

◆

**How would you modify it to work best in your class?**

Conferences allow for more mutuality in student assessment: teacher and student work together to develop an accurate assessment of learning and progress.

### Assessing the Program

The above forms of assessment acknowledge that students have much to contribute in terms of their own assessment. They are often quite aware of their own progress and what they still need to work on. At the same time, they are also aware of what it is about the class or program that works best for them, and where there may be room for improvement. Just as customers in a store often complete "satisfaction" surveys, so can students inform programs about the degree to which they are meeting students' needs. We suggest giving students a voice in assessing classes and the program in general. Teachers and program staff gain valuable insights about how their 'customers' perceive their efforts. At the same time, students gain a sense of ownership over their learning. Asking students for suggestions often results in effective fine-tuning of instruction that is rewarding to all concerned.

How to incorporate program evaluation by students depends on the teacher and the students. It can be a formal process, with written evaluation forms, or it can be an informal class discussion. Whatever procedures teachers decide upon, students must understand that their honest feedback is desired, and that their responses and suggestions for modifying and adjusting the program will be considered and, if possible, acted upon.

### *Discussion Questions*

**Some teachers feel uncomfortable allowing their students to assess their class. How do you feel about this?**

◆

**How would you organize a student assessment of your program or class so that you and the students would feel the most comfortable?**

◆

**Would you be willing to take their suggestions to heart?**

## ◆ STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS

The CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System), TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education), BEST (Basic English Skills Test), and ABLE (Adult Basic Learning Examination) are all standardized, norm-referenced tests widely used to evaluate the progress of adult literacy students. While these tests are often promoted as being good for placing students into appropriate classes, for tracking students' progress, and for providing diagnostic assessments, norm-referenced tests provide programs with limited information about the individual students who take them. A solid understanding of norm-referenced tests enables teachers to determine the role these tests should play in an adult literacy setting and to make sure the results are not misinterpreted.

Before using a particular assessment, understand what, specifically, it is testing. For example, many tests — particularly those with "survey" in the title — are appropriate for testing general achievement, but not for providing a diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses. See the chart for an analysis of many tests used in adult literacy education.

Look at the publishing date of the test. Is it current? If not, the test may not reflect the latest understanding of adult literacy theory and research. Nor will an older test reflect accurately the relative standing of students, since norm samples will be from many years ago.

Ensure that the test is appropriate to use with your specific population of students. Some tests are able to provide an assessment of a wide range of abilities, while others are restricted to certain ability levels. For example, some tests are inappropriate to use with students at very limited literacy levels. These details indicate the types of students for whom the test is appropriate, i.e. for whom the results are meaningful.

Standardized tests are so called because the administration of the test is expected to be uniform, or standardized, across testing situations. The tests may be designed to be administered to groups or to individual students. Some tests must be taken within a specified amount of time; other tests allow students to work on them as long as they want. A standardized test must be administered exactly as specified, using the same directions, every time. If a test is designed to be administered to a group, and it is administered to a single individual, the reliability, or trustworthiness, of the results is lowered. If an exam is meant to be timed, but is administered without time limits, then the results cannot be interpreted as presented by the test makers.

## ◆ TABLE 1: Overview of Standardized Assessments Used in Adult Education and ESOL

| Name of Assessment | Publisher | Target Population | Purpose | Scores presented as | Designed for Class Placement | Designed to Assess Progress | Designed to Diagnose Learner Needs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **ABLE** (Adult Basic Learning Examination) | The Psychological Corporation/ Harcourt Educational Measurements | ABE students | Norm referenced/ Assess grade level in vocabulary, reading, spelling, number operations, and problem solving | Grade equivalent | Yes | Yes | No |
| **BEST** (Basic English Skills Test) | Center for Applied Linguistics | Adult ESOL students at the survival and pre-employment skills level | Competency based/ Assess very basic reading, writing, oral communication and listening skills | Scaled scores ranging from 0 (ESOL level 1) to 65+ (ESOL level 6) | Yes | No | Yes |
| **CASAS** (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System) | CASAS | ABE students<br>ESOL students | Competency based/Assess basic skill level in reading<br>Assess English reading & listening skills | Scaled scores ranging from 150 (special needs) to 250 | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **TABE** (Test of Adult Basic Education) | CTB McGraw-Hill | All levels of adult education students except beginning literacy level | Norm Referenced/Assess grade level in reading, math & language | Percentile scores, scaled scores, and grade equivalent | Yes | Yes | No |

## Criterion-Referenced Tests

Standardized assessments can be either criterion-referenced or norm-referenced. Criterion-referenced tests are designed to measure the progress of students against a pre-specified set of objectives and/or goals for a specific population of students. The results of these tests can be used by teachers to inform their instruction if the criteria match those of the teacher or the specific program. For each criterion being assessed, criterion-referenced tests will reveal what the student(s) have learned, the degree to which they have learned it, and how much more they need to work on this skill before they can be said to have "mastered" it.

## Norm-Referenced Tests

Norm-referenced tests, on the other hand, are designed to measure the progress of students relative to the performance of a representative group of students, known as the *norm sample*. The norm sample consists of a large group of people who are representative of the students for whom the test is designed, along with such factors as gender, age, grade, socioeconomic status, place of residence (geographically urban, rural, suburban), and so on. Members of the norm group, selected by the test makers, are given the test and, from their scores, the 'norms' of the test are formed. If the characteristics upon which the sub-sample was formed do not match the characteristics of the students who take the test, the results cannot be interpreted appropriately. Norm-referenced tests can indicate how students are progressing only relative to this norm sample.

Norm-referenced tests can be useful for comparison purposes: they describe how students score on a sample of items relative to other adults. That is how we can arrive at descriptions like "average," "below average," or "above average." This assessment of student achievement, however, is not based on all adult literacy students taking the test at the same time as the students currently taking it. Instead, a transformed score is use. The transformed score refers to the specific sub-sample of students whose scores were used to norm the test, perhaps 10 or 20 years ago (check the date of the norms on any norm-referenced test for this information). "Transformed scores" are created by applying the "raw score" — number

**◆ MAKING CONNECTIONS: Find a copy of the standardized assessment your program uses and answer the following questions.**

What is it called?

When was it published?

Is it criterion-referenced or norm-referenced?

Does it have specific instructions for how it must be administered?

Based on what you have just read, what do you think this test is able to tell you about your students' level or progress?

What can't it tell you?

correct — received by a student to the normally distributed results obtained by the norm sample to obtain a comparative results such as 40th percentile or 5th stanine, and so on. If students are severely learning disabled or have extreme academic difficulties, but the norm sample does not include such students, then it becomes very difficult to interpret students' scores.

Norm-referenced tests are purposefully designed and chosen to result in a distribution of scores that reflects a "bell curve" or a *normal distribution.* A normal distribution of scores is one in which the majority of scores are clustered around the mean, falling symmetrically on each side of the mean to the point where only a few scores fall at the extreme ends. Thus, one of the primary purposes of norm-referenced tests is to rank students along a normal curve, not, as for criterion-referenced tests, to measure progress on specific instructional goals. This characteristic makes them less useful for teachers interested in individual students' gains.

This goal of a normal distribution of scores on a norm-referenced test means that some questions are designed to be difficult because a certain number of students must get them wrong to result in a normal distribution of students. The same is true for items that are designed to be very easy — a certain number of test takers must get them right to arrive at a normal distribution of all scores. Thus, the best items for norm-referenced tests are those that only 40 to 60 percent of students will answer correctly. If everyone could answer all items correctly, the test would, by definition, be flawed as a norm-referenced test (i.e. there would be no "average," "below average," or "above average").

Norm-referenced tests cannot directly inform instruction therefore, because the questions asked have no actual information relevant to specific curricula or students. Given this, it is apparent why norm-referenced tests are not the best assessments for ascertaining whether or not students are actually learning what they have set out to learn in class. Standardized, norm-referenced assessments are useful as decontextualized measures of where students are relative to a representative sample. They should never be used as the only, or primary, assessment of student progress, but only as one assessment used in tandem with others.

### Funder Requirements

Teachers are often required to give a standardized, norm-referenced assessment. Funders often prefer this kind of assessment because it is easily interpretable. It can be one important tool among many others. A standardized, norm-referenced assessment that is well developed and reflects recent norms acquired from a sample of adults whose characteristics include those of the students in the program does provide a fairly accurate measure of their performance, relative to other adults.

The critical issue is what can these tests tell us about students' progress? Given the limitations of norm-referenced tests already described, the answer to this question must be: *some notion of movement relative to the norm but nothing specific regarding particular skills as they are applied to different types of texts read for different purposes.* If a particular student's transformed score is higher from one testing to another on a norm-referenced test (and assuming that the tests taken are either the same or equivalent as attested to in the technical manual), one can assume that the student's overall ability has improved. On the other hand, if a student's transformed score is lower from one testing to another, this does not mean that his ability has deteriorated. It simply means that this student did not make the same growth over time as did those in the norm sample, from which the transformed score comes. Teachers must take it upon themselves to inform their funders what the results of norm-referenced assessments do, and do not, tell us about student progress.

The teachers we spoke to about authentic materials and activities do administer standardized norm-referenced tests because they must, but they certainly do not base their instruction entirely upon the results. Further, they work to educate their funders about better, more useful, forms of assessment. Learner-contextualized assessment provides both funders and teachers with relevant and targeted information about changes in students' actual uses of literacy.

## ◆ POINTS TO REMEMBER

- By getting to know the students and their goals and needs, teachers can design learner-contextualized assessment techniques that do assess the degree to which these needs are being met through increased literacy abilities and practices.
- Students, themselves, are often the most informative in terms of assessing their progress and how literacy increasingly helps them live their lives.

- Students are also an important source of information on the degrees to which different programs are helping and can contribute valuable suggestions for program design and reform.
- Standardized, norm-referenced assessments, by definition, are decontextualized from the lives of students.
- While some comparative, normative information can be gained from norm-referenced assessments, this information is of little use in terms of informing instruction.

# Concluding Thoughts

We hope this handbook has been helpful to those thinking about transforming their adult literacy classes by using real-life texts and purposes for reading and writing instruction. As the LPALS results demonstrate, the use of authentic literacy materials and activities is statistically related to increased uses of reading and writing in the lives of the students. And isn't that what it's all about? Helping those adults who proclaim a desire and need to lead more literate lives to do so? We think so.

Providing adult learners with more authentic experiences with print in the context of schooling means working to change ideas about instruction and about teacher and student relationships. It is a challenging task. It is easier to use a prescribed and prewritten curriculum and apply it day after day, week after week. As we have tried to demonstrate, using authentic materials and activities means truly getting to know the students and their needs and goals. It means finding printed texts that have meaning for the students and ensuring that those texts are read or written for real-life reasons, all the while providing students with the literacy skills and strategies they will need to read or write those texts effectively. This is not easy.

However, we are convinced that using authentic materials and activities, while not always easy, does result in easy learning. By this we mean that, for the student, it does make learning to read and write— better and more —

feel easier, faster, and much more immediately meaningful. Any teacher who has seen the deep engagement and motivation to master reading or writing skills to get that letter to the editor written and sent or to read a school report on a child knows what these moments are like. We now have empirical evidence that using authentic materials and activities results in important changes in out-of-school literacy practices, and that this approach is more likely to be associated with these changes than teaching that relies upon the use of school-only materials and activities. It is nice when scientific evidence corroborates teachers' experiences in the classroom.

We leave with a final acknowledgement and word of caution. This handbook can only be the beginning. It cannot, nor should it, provide a blueprint for anyone's class. Rather, it has been our goal to help teachers think about the nature and need for authentic materials and activities in the adult literacy classroom. While we have suggested ways to identify, acquire, and use certain types of texts, it will be the learners in each teacher's classroom who determine what is 'authentic.' The themes that they find of interest will give the class direction.

Teachers who use this handbook to begin to bring more authentic materials and activities into their adult literacy classes will increase their chances of success if they can find others who are also involved in the same transformation. Some ideas will seem to work effortlessly and others will not. Colleagues who are struggling with the same issues can share their successes, and failures. They can provide crucial feedback, support, ideas and suggestions. We have engaged in this type of sharing with the teachers in our study, from whom we have learned a great deal. Finally, it is our hope that teachers who believe in the value of learner–contextualized adult literacy instruction can document their successes and work as a group to transform policy.

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APPENDIX ONE

# *Two Class Portraits*

The following portraits are composites, drawn from the variety of classes in our study that were notable for their use of authentic materials and activities. One is an ESOL class, and the other is a tutor-learner pair. In light of what was discussed in this handbook, try to answer the following questions.

1) Which of the theories discussed in this book do you see as relevant to these classes?
2) What pedagogical theory do you see as informing these classes?
3) How do the two classes compare and contrast to one another?
4) How does your own class compare and contrast to these two classes?

## ◆ CLASS PORTRAIT ONE

### Ms. Johnson's ESOL Class

Ms. Johnson teaches an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) class. In her classroom are two large tables around which the 20 students sit. The bookshelves are filled with copies of well-worn ESOL textbooks and workbooks, selected reference materials, and trade books of a wide variety of complexity (some of which are slightly out of date). The walls have educational posters on them, such as the food pyramid and information about the dangers of smoking, and some biographical posters, including Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr. On a small table lay flyers for local service organizations and a binder that contains contact information for various government agencies.

The students in this class come from five different countries, and, between them, speak four different native languages. Most of them did not complete high school in their homelands, and they are working on their literacy skills in addition to increasing their English speaking skills. At the start of the semester, Ms. Johnson sat down with each student to complete a goals checklist. Students indicated which of the items on the list were important to them. At the same time, students completed an entrance exam, which Ms. Johnson used to determine their ESOL needs. Based on these two pieces of information, Ms. Johnson put together a rough syllabus for the semester.

Before class begins each day, Ms. Johnson looks at her lesson plan. For the last two weeks, students in the class have been studying and using prepositions. This work has been done in the context of activities the students engage in outside of the classroom. Students have examined local bus schedules and have worked at reading bills. In each case, the students identified prepositions that were essential to an understanding of the documents. Additional work on prepositions has been done in the context of gift giving and receiving. At Ms. Johnson's suggestion, students have made a shopping list for Christmas gifts, and have made a wish list for themselves. Today the students will work on writing "thank you" letters. Some of the students have said that they will actually use them, but for some of the students it is only practice.

Class starts at nine AM, but it is not until 9:10 that all of the students have arrived. For the first 10 minutes, Ms. Johnson discusses current events with the students. She begins by talking about the recent hurricane that hit the Dominican Republic and Haiti. A newspaper report detailed the difficulty people are having. Many of the students in Ms. Johnson's class are from those two countries, so they know first hand how devastating the aftermath can be.

At 9:10, Ms. Johnson stands up and announces the beginning of the spelling test. Ms. Johnson felt like some students were having problems with some key words in the reading for last class, and so she has picked those words to be the basis for today's list. This takes up the first 15 minutes of class time.

Once the spelling test is completed, Ms. Johnson passes out a newspaper report about how immigrants in the United States get information about what is happening in their home countries. It contains a list of local native language media, and a schedule for their broadcasts. Ms. Johnson asks the students to read the newspaper first and circle words they don't know. This takes about 30 minutes. Once this has been done, the students and teacher begin a conversation about the article. Ms. Johnson asks the students about their own experience and opinions. She writes the names of native language media on the board. Several students speak up, but many sit quietly. Some start working on their homework. The discussion lasts 15 minutes.

Looking at her lesson plan, Ms. Johnson explains the next assignment. After the break, students can either write a journal entry about getting news from their home country, or they can work on their thank you letters. As students are working by themselves, Ms. Johnson circulates through the room, working with individual students for a few minutes at a time. Before class ends, Ms. Johnson hands out a worksheet about calculating long distance rates for overseas calls.

At the end of the day, Ms. Johnson reflects on the class. She is frustrated that students don't take more of a lead. She feels she provides opportunities for students to really make connections between their life outside of school and what they are doing in the classroom, but students do not take advantage of them. Students sometimes say, "You're the teacher, you decide." At other times they sit silently. Sometimes those opportunities to explore a topic in greater depth are missed because Ms. Johnson feels pressure to stick to the lesson plan she had drawn up. Grounding activities and materials in the real life of students is important, she thinks, but at times it is very hard to accomplish.

## ◆ CLASS PORTRAIT TWO

### Tutoring Pair: Wendy and Flora

At 9:30 AM on a Friday, Flora meets Wendy in one of the rooms of the Community Learning Center. Flora Rodriguez is an adult basic education (ABE) tutor at the Center and Wendy Thomas is one of her students. They have been meeting four times a week for close to a year, and this seems to be helping Wendy quite a bit. When they began, Flora told Wendy that she could meet anytime in the morning. Wendy decided on 9:30 because she would have time to take her children to school and to go to the Community Center right after that.

The session is held in a rather big room that has a long table in the center where other tutor/learner pairs work as well. The room has many learning materials: a bookcase with different kinds of readings for adults — novels, short stories, history, or other thematic books — and also a section of children's books. Next to it sits another bookshelf with diverse textbooks, workbooks, and reference materials such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. The local newspaper and different magazines are piled on top of a table by the wall. In one corner is a computer, and next to it is a set of basic instructions for email and Internet use. Next to the door hangs a board for notices from the school and from organizations in the community. Also posted is a schedule for the Learners' Council meetings, and information about the school's working committees. One of the committees is preparing a Christmas festival, and has left a sign up sheet for volunteers. On the blackboard is a message: "Attention - the parents' group meeting is tonight at 7 PM."

When Wendy comes into the room, Flora greets her. "Good morning. How are you doing this morning?"

"I am good, but I got up at 5:30 and I still have so many things to do."

"OK", Flora says, "let's get started."

Wendy sits down, opens her bag and takes out a notebook, a novel she is reading, and an official-looking envelope. Flora picks up the notebook. "Did you do any work on what we wrote yesterday? We planned to finish it today and then send it right out to the paper, right?"

Wendy looks at the draft of the letter, but then picks up the envelope. "Yes, but I also need to read this letter I got from the housing authority. I took a look at it, but I think I need some help with it."

Usually, Wendy and Flora decide on a workplan at the beginning of the week. Last Monday, Wendy came to class very disturbed. A young girl in her neighborhood had been assaulted and Wendy felt that the police, the school, and the community were not being active enough in their response to the incident. Wendy's daughter is the same age as the girl who was attacked, and it touched Wendy deeply. Both teacher and student decided to follow the coverage in the local news and to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. Wendy felt that this was an important project to carry out during her meetings with Flora. She also proposed to do some research into issues of women's rights and safety, which she did mostly on the Internet. Usually, Wendy reads aloud and tries to make meaning of the text. When she doesn't know a word or understand a sentence, she uses the dictionary to help her out. Sometimes she asks Flora to explain it to her. During their sessions they also work on vocabulary and spelling.

During this class, Wendy finishes her letter to the editor. Wendy types it into the computer, and Flora shows her how to use the spell check. Wendy writes down some words she didn't understand or misspelled. She then looks around for the address of the paper to which the letter will be sent. Once it has been placed in the envelope and addressed, Wendy hands Flora the letter from the housing authority. She has a meeting coming up, and she wants to make sure that she brings everything she needs. She often brings in documents like this. Flora also looks around for materials that would be of interest to Wendy, and every Monday they choose among the materials that Flora has collected, and then plan for the week.

At the end of this morning's session, Wendy and Flora discuss prospects for Monday. Wendy told Flora that she wanted to get her driver's license. She thinks it will give her more independence, and may also help her to start a catering business with their daughter. Flora says that she will look for some information about driver's licenses, and next week they will begin that as their next project. Between the license and the catering business they have a lot of work to do.

# *Resources*

This resource list is intended to provide a starting point for teachers interested in using authentic materials and activities in the classroom. Many of these texts were mentioned by teachers in our study. We should note that because we did not review each of these texts, inclusion on this list does not mean that we believe that the text is necessarily a good one. We suggest that teachers review a text that sparks their interest, checking to see if it is relevant and worthwhile for their own students. Some of these materials may be hard to find or out of print. Some may be available through ERIC.

## ◆ STUDENT WRITINGS

*My Native Land: An Anthology of New Writers*
Literacy Volunteers of New York (1992)

*Voices: New Writers for New Readers*
Invergarry Learning Centre in Vancouver, BC
Available from Delta Systems Company, Inc.,
1400 Miller Parkway, McHenry, IL 60050
Phone: 800-323-8270.

*We Are More Than You See (Vol. 1 - 3)*
Labor-Management Worker Education Program
University of Massachusetts - Amherst
Phone: 413-545-2031

*Working Writers (Vol. 1 - 4)*
SEIU Local 285, Worker Education Program
21 Fellows Street
Boston, MA 02119
Phone: 617- 541-6847 ext. 128

## ◆ CURRICULUM GUIDES AND TEACHING RESOURCES

*Adult ESL Literacy: From the Community the Community*
Auerbach, E., Barahona, B., Midy, J., Vaquerano, F., Zambrano, A., & Arnaud, J. (1996).
Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

*Breast Cancer and the Environment: A Curriculum Guide*
Merson, M. & Sedor, M. (1997)
World Education
44 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210
Phone: 617-482-9485

*Bringing Literacy to Life*
Wrigley, H. & Guth, G. (1992)
San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International 1992

*The Change Agent*
A newspaper for students and teachers interested in social justice
Available from New England Literacy Resource Center/World Education
44 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210
Phone: 617-482-9485

*Civic Participation and Community Action Sourcebook*
Nash, A. (1999)
New England Literacy Resource Center
44 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210

*College Preparation for Health Care Workers: Reading and Writing Curriculum*
Consortium for Worker Education
275 17th Ave. 18th Floor
New York, NY 10011

*Dimensions of Change: An Authentic Assessment Guidebook*
Schneider, M. & Clarke, M. (1995)
Adult Basic Literacy Educators (ABLE) Network of Washington
Seattle, WA
Phone: 360-586-3527
E-mail: able@sbctc.ctc.edu

*Education for Critical Consciousness*
Freire, P. (1973).
New York, NY: Continuum

*Equipped for the Future: A Reform Agenda for Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning*
Stein, S. (1997)
National Institute for Literacy
Washington, DC

*Freire for the Classroom*
Shor, I. (1987)
Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann

*Health Care Employee GED Curriculum*
Consortium for Worker Education
275 17th Ave. 18th Floor
New York, NY 10011

*Healthy Beginnings: Lead Safe Families*
Education Development Center, Inc. Newton, MA (1996)
New England Office of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency - Region 1
1 Congress Street
Boston, MA 02114-2023
Phone: (888) 372-7341
On-line: www.epa.gov/region01/eco/lead/index.html

*Learning for Our Health: A Resource for Participatory Literacy and Health Education*
Norton, M. and Campbell, P. (1998)
The Learning Centre Literacy Association
Edmonton, Canada
Phone: 403-429-0675

*Making Cents: An Economic Literacy Sourcebook*
Cohen-Mitchell, J.
Western SABES
Holyoke Community College
303 Homestead Ave.
Holyoke, MA 01040
On-line: www.sabes.org

*Making Connections: Literacy and EAL from a Feminist Perspective*
Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women
256 Jarvis Street Suite 5A
Toronto, Canada M5B2J4
On-line: www.nald.ca/cclow.htm

*Making Meaning, Making Change: Participatory Curriculum Development for Adult ESL Literacy*
Auerbach, E.R. (1992)
Center for Applied Linguistics
Washington, DC

*Project Overcome*
Mental Health and Wellness Curriculum Project
Project Overcome
PO Box 3855226
Minneapolis, MN 55438-5226

*News for You*
A newspaper written and designed for adult literacy students.
New Readers Press
P.O. Box 35888
Syracuse, NY 13235-5888
Phone: 800-448-8878

*New Ways of Using Authentic Materials in the Classroom*
Larimer, R. and Schleicher, L. (Eds.) (1999)
Waldorf, MD: TESOL Publications

*Now We Read, We See, We Speak: Portrait of Literacy Development in an Adult Freirean-Based Class*
Purcell-Gates, V. and Waterman, R. (2000)
Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

*Planning and Implementing Instruction for Adults: A Theme-Based Approach*
Dirx, J. & Prenger, S. (1997)
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

*The Right to Understand: Linking Literacy to Health and Safety Training*
Szudy, E. and Arroyo, M.G. (1994)
Labor Occupational Health Program
University of California, Berkeley
2525 Channing Way, Berkeley, CA 94720
Phone: (510) 642-5507
On-line: www.lohp.org

*Talking Shop: A Curriculum Sourcebook for Participatory Adult ESL*
Nash, A., Cason, A., Rhum, M., McGrail, L. & Gomez-Sanford, R. (1992)
Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics

## ◆ WEBLIOGRAPHY

### On-Line Newspapers for Students

| | |
|---|---|
| *The Change Agent* | http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent/ |
| *News for You* | http://www.news-for-you.com/ |
| *The Key* | http://www.keynews.org/ |

### Collections of Student Writings

| | |
|---|---|
| *Dorcas Place* | http://members.tripod.com/waterbabies99/main.html |
| *LD OnLine: First Person Narratives* | http://www.ldonline.org/first_person/first_person_archives.html |
| *Learners in Action* | http://www.literacy.ca/public/action/archive.htm |
| *Archie Willard's Home page* | http://www.readiowa.org/archiew.html |
| *WNET School* | http://www.wnet.org/wnetschool/adulted/lessons.html |
| *Write Away!* | http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/writeaway/ |

## Curriculum Guidelines and Teacher Resources

| | |
|---|---|
| *Apartment Hunting* | http://www2.wgbh.org/mbcweis/akira/iib/apt.htm |
| *California Distance Learning Project* | http://www.cdlponline.org/ |
| *Easy Reader Voting Guide* | http://www.easyvoter.org/ |
| *Hands on English* | http://www.handsonenglish.com/ |
| *Health Action Team* | http://www2.wgbh.org/mbcweis/ltc/sccc/Nutrlmap/example.html |
| *How to Vote: An Election Tutorial* | http://www.cdlponline.org/vote.html |
| *Life Application Curriculum* | http://www.crec.org/atdn/teacher_resources/lvalifeapp.shtml |
| *The Literacy List* | http://www.alri.org/literacylist.html |
| *SABES* | http://www.sabes.org |

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